

**“Three Trials, Three Verdicts, an Unexpected Sentence, and an Offer”**

**1 Samuel 12**

**April 28, 2019**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service**

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It's been over a month since we've been in First Samuel, and we return now to chapter twelve.

In chapter eleven God worked through Saul to defeat the Ammonites.

And then, at the end of chapter eleven we read we read this: “Then Samuel said to the people, ‘Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingdom.’ So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before Yahweh in Gilgal. There they sacrificed peace offerings before Yahweh, and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly.”

Now we come to chapter twelve, where the prophet Samuel will address Israel as part of this renewal of the kingdom.

So, with that context in mind: First Samuel, chapter twelve, starting with verse one.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God's word for us this evening:

<sup>12:1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And now, behold, the king walks before you, and I am old and gray; and behold, my sons are with you. I have walked before you from my youth until this day. <sup>3</sup> Here I am; testify against me before Yahweh 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.” <sup>4</sup> They said, “You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from any man's hand.” <sup>5</sup> And he said to them, “Yahweh 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.”

<sup>6</sup> And Samuel said to the people, “Yahweh is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. <sup>7</sup> Now therefore stand still that I may plead with you before Yahweh concerning all the righteous deeds of Yahweh that he performed for you and for your fathers. <sup>8</sup> When Jacob went into Egypt, and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your fathers cried out to Yahweh and Yahweh sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place. <sup>9</sup> But they forgot Yahweh their God. And he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Habor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab. And they fought against them. <sup>10</sup> And they cried out to Yahweh and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have forsaken Yahweh and have served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. But now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, that we may serve you.’ <sup>11</sup> And Yahweh 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. <sup>12</sup> 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 Yahweh your God was your king. <sup>13</sup> And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, Yahweh has set a king over you. <sup>14</sup> If you will fear Yahweh and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of Yahweh, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow Yahweh your God, it will be well. <sup>15</sup> But if you will not obey the voice of Yahweh, but rebel against the commandment of Yahweh, then the hand of Yahweh will be against you and your

king.<sup>16</sup> Now therefore stand still and see this great thing that Yahweh will do before your eyes. <sup>17</sup> Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call upon Yahweh, 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 Yahweh, in asking for yourselves a king.” <sup>18</sup> So Samuel called upon Yahweh, and Yahweh sent thunder and rain that day, and all the people greatly feared Yahweh and Samuel.

<sup>19</sup> And all the people said to Samuel, “Pray for your servants to Yahweh your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king.” <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 Yahweh, but serve Yahweh with all your heart. <sup>21</sup> And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty. <sup>22</sup> For Yahweh will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased Yahweh to make you a people for himself. <sup>23</sup> Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against Yahweh by ceasing to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. <sup>24</sup> Only fear Yahweh and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. <sup>25</sup> But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let's pray ...

Lord, our souls long for your salvation,  
and so we hope in your word.  
We long for your promise,  
and we long for your comfort.  
Whatever trials and hardships we face,  
we do not forget you, but we look for your deliverance.  
As we come now to your word,  
We ask that in your steadfast love you would give us life,  
Strengthen and guide us  
so that we can keep the testimonies that have come to us from *your* lips.  
Grant this we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.  
[Psalm 119:81-84, 88]

I will try to keep my remarks a bit more brief tonight, since we have spent time discussing Pastor Gutierrez's call and we still have the Lord's Supper ahead of us.

Our text tonight can be divided up into three trials, three verdicts, one sentence, and one offer.  
[Leithart, 83]

Tonight, we will walk through our text together noting those features and seeing what they have to say for us.

So, let's dive in.

As I said, our passage tonight begins with three trials.

The first trial comes in verses one through five. Here Samuel, the prophet, the designated mediator between God and the people, begins by putting *himself* on trial. He states: “I have walked before you from my youth until this day. Here I am; testify against me before Yahweh 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.”

Samuel invites Israel to make a charge against him if he has been unfaithful in his calling to serve as their judge and mediator. And the key word in the list of possible charges is “take”. And this is especially significant because Samuel has already confronted Israel for requesting the kind of king who would be characterized by taking more than by serving. [Firth 145; Leithart, 83]

A worldly king might take from the people rather than serve them, but not Samuel. He calls on the people to bring any such charges against him if any believe that such charges can be made. And in verse five Israel responds by declaring Samuel’s innocence.

The reason Samuel begins by putting himself on trial is because of the role he will have to play in what follows. Samuel will serve as the mediator between Yahweh and Israel as the kingdom is renewed, and that is a tough role. As we will see, it will mean leveling some serious charges. And for the mediator to do it rightly, there must be no question as to his motives or his desires in the process. As the mediator of this kingdom renewal Samuel must be a man characterized by serving rather than taking. If the mediator of what follows is not reliable, if the mediator is suspect, if the mediator is in it for himself, then all that he says and does in what follows is liable to fall apart.

This is a good picture of why ministers in Christ’s church are called to the standards they are. Throughout church history men have been drawn to the ministry because of what they could *get from it* rather than because of how they could *serve*. And breakdown always followed. And so it is today – in the news and online we see the public downfall of men in ministry who came to *take* rather than to *give*.

And this is heinous in part because a minister, as we will see, has a similar role as Samuel in this chapter. They are the mediators of the renewal of the relationship between God and his people. In a sense they serve that role every Lord’s Day. And in that role, they are sometimes called, as Samuel will be in a few verses, to say difficult things. And if anyone suspects that their reasons for saying what they say are self-serving rather than other-serving, then the whole thing falls apart. In Scripture, in history, in current events, we see how essential it is that ministers, that God’s ambassadors, that the mediators in the renewal of the relationship between Christ and his people, be above reproach. And *that* is where Samuel starts. He asks anyone with a charge against him to bring it. None do. And Israel declares him not guilty.

The first trial and the first verdict.

The second trial comes in verses six through eleven. Here Samuel moves from the role of defendant to the role of prosecutor. Though ... in this instance he is a prosecutor without even a shred of a case, and he knows it.

But nonetheless he proceeds and shifts his attention to Yahweh. He begins to survey the case against Yahweh. Has Yahweh been faithful to his role?

And in verses six through eleven Samuel recounts the deeds of Yahweh ... and as he does ... all he can find is faithfulness. “Stand still,” he says in verse seven, “that I may plead with you before Yahweh concerning all the righteous deeds of Yahweh that he performed for you and for your fathers.” And then starting with Moses he recounts how Yahweh delivered his people again, and again, and again – how Israel would turn from Yahweh, how Yahweh would allow them to

be disciplined by letting their enemies reign over them, but then how every time they cried out to him again, Yahweh was there. Yahweh delivered them again and again.

The second trial is brief – the verdict is so obvious that Samuel gives it before even recounting all the evidence. Yahweh has time and time again been faithful to his people and is declared not just not guilty, but righteous.

So goes the second trial and the second verdict.

And then, with no introduction, Samuel, the prosecutor shifts his prosecutorial focus from Yahweh to Israel in verse twelve.

In the previous verses Samuel recounts again and again how faithful Yahweh has been in delivering Israel, no matter how strong their enemies, and no matter how grave their sin before they repented.

And in verse twelve Samuel says, “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 Yahweh your God was your king.”

We have observed before that a king was not forbidden to Israel – but the kind of king Israel wanted, the reasons they wanted a king – this was the problem. They wanted a king not as an earthly representative of Yahweh’s reign over them, but as a replacement for Yahweh – as an alternative to Yahweh.

This was a faithless action on Israel’s part for a number of reasons, chief among them being the fact that despite how many times Yahweh their God had delivered them in the past, when a new threat came in Nahash, Israel had no faith in Yahweh but sought an alternative instead. Israel has broken faith with the Lord.

Samuel, the prosecutor, has presented his evidence, and he says in verse seventeen that this evidence points to the truth of Israel’s great wickedness.

And then Yahweh declares his verdict.

In verses sixteen through eighteen Samuel is speaking – he says “<sup>16</sup>Now therefore stand still and see this great thing that Yahweh will do before your eyes. <sup>17</sup>Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call upon Yahweh, 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 Yahweh, in asking for yourselves a king.’ <sup>18</sup>So Samuel called upon Yahweh, and Yahweh sent thunder and rain that day, and all the people greatly feared Yahweh and Samuel.”

We need to stop and recognize at this point that there’s more going on here than might appear for us at first glance. This is not just God making some thunder to back Samuel up. This is a verdict from Yahweh and is rightly taken as such by Israel.

As Samuel says, it is the time of the wheat harvest. This meant two things concerning rain. First, “rain was extremely rare at this time” of year [Davis, 126] – “virtually unknown” as one commentator puts it. And so “Thunder and rain are completely unexpected.” [Firth, 147] So first, coincidence is so unlikely that Israel could have confidence that God was the one acting in the thunder.

But second, the threat of prolonged rain would itself have been a threat of judgment. As one commentator explains: “The sign was terrifying, not only because of the natural fear many had of thunderstorms, but because the rain could damage the harvest, causing some grain to rot.” [Firth, 147]

In other words, the thunder both communicated that Yahweh supported Samuel’s prosecutorial claim about Israel’s sin and wickedness, and it indicated the kind of judgment they deserved. God had blessed them, in this case with crops, and they deserve to have those blessings taken away. Israel stands before Samuel, and more importantly before Yahweh, condemned. They are guilty.

Thus, we have the third trial and the third verdict.

From there we move on to the sentencing phase. Samuel and Yahweh have been declared innocent. Israel has been found guilty. Yahweh stands ready and able to carry out the sentence – the threat of the thunderstorm continuing and destroying the crops would make that clear.

And so, what will the sentence be?

Before the sentencing Israel makes a statement in verse nineteen: “And all the people said to Samuel, ‘Pray for your servants to Yahweh your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king.’”

Israel owns their guilt.

And then the sentence ... the unusual sentence ... comes. Justice was due. And the sentence delivered instead, is mercy:

<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 Yahweh, but serve Yahweh with all your heart. <sup>21</sup> And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty. <sup>22</sup> For Yahweh will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased Yahweh to make you a people for himself.”

Samuel here delivers a verdict from Yahweh – a verdict of mercy. He has just told them that they deserve judgment and even death for their rebellion against God. And then he tells them not to be afraid. Because even so, Yahweh will not forsake them.

They ask for mercy ... and they receive it.

An unexpected sentence is delivered: Mercy when justice was due.

And the undeserved mercy does not end there either. Samuel continues in verse twenty-three:

<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against Yahweh by ceasing to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. <sup>24</sup> Only fear Yahweh and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. <sup>25</sup> But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.”

After delivering this undeserved, unexpected verdict of mercy, Samuel then gives two other gracious offers: he offers them assistance and he offers them instruction.

In the first half of verse twenty-three we see that the assistance comes in the form of intercession. He will pray for them. He will plead with Yahweh to continue to be gracious to them. He will pray to Yahweh to continue to work in their hearts so that they will be faithful to their covenant with him. He will help secure spiritual nurture for them.

And then, in the second half of verse twenty-two and what follows, we see that the second gracious offer he has for them is instruction: “I will instruct you in the good and the right way.” And without missing a beat, he begins offering that instruction – exhorting them to “fear Yahweh and serve him faithfully with all [their] heart,” urging them to “consider what great things he has done for [them],” warning them that if they persist in acting “wickedly, [they] shall be swept away” – both them and their king.

Upon declaring a sentence of mercy, Samuel immediately offers them spiritual assistance and instruction.

At this point, we should pause and consider that pattern of this kingdom renewal ceremony – the pattern of our text:

- Yahweh’s representative – his ambassador, his spokesperson, comes forward.
- He directs the people’s attention to Yahweh, and Yahweh’s righteousness and faithfulness are proclaimed.
- He directs the people’s attention to themselves, and their guilt quickly becomes evident.
- The people acknowledge their sin, and ask for forgiveness
- The mediator, God’s spokesperson, then proclaims the unexpected sentence of mercy – of pardon
- God through his spokesperson then offers both spiritual help and spiritual guidance – both intercession and instruction to the people, so that they may be faithful to their God.

That pattern should be familiar. That pattern is what we do every Lord’s Day morning. Isn’t it?

The minister comes forward and directs our attention to the Lord, and in the first hymn we declare his goodness and faithfulness. We declare a verdict of “righteous” towards our God, just as Samuel and Israel do in our text.

Then the attention shifts to us. And the verdict comes back guilty. And we are reminded that we deserve judgment – we stand before God as Israel did with the thunder clouds of judgment looming over us.

And then, like Israel here, we confess our sin and plead for forgiveness.

And then, God declares the sentence of mercy over us his people, just as he does through Samuel in our text.

And from there, we move towards spiritual nurture and instruction. We declare the gospel to one another in song. We pray for one another. We receive instruction from God’s word. And often it all culminates in a meal that both instructs and nurtures us in our faith.

Samuel gathered Israel, remember, to renew the kingdom. And this is the pattern to do it. And in a sense, every Sunday morning as we gather, God once again renews his kingdom with us, he renews us as his covenant community – not in the sense that the kingdom or the covenant would expire without such a gathering, but in the sense that the people of God need to renew their

relationship with their God and king – to clear the air of our sin again, to receive his mercy afresh, to receive nurture and instruction again from him. The kingdom is renewed, refreshed, reaffirmed.

And it's worth noting that this pattern is not unique in the Scripture. It does not appear just here and then again in our worship. We see the same pattern when God *makes* a covenant with Israel. We see the same pattern when we look at the format of Israel's Temple worship.

And the reason that pattern emerges again and again in covenant-making, in temple-worship, in kingdom-renewal, and in historic Christian worship, is because it is, after all the pattern of the gospel itself.

And in the gospel, it is Christ who is our truest Mediator. *He* comes forward and he is truly and entirely blameless – more so than Samuel or any minister could hope to be.

He points us to God's holiness and convicts us of our sin. He shows us the justice we deserve. He receives our plea for mercy and announces a sentence of pardon over us.

And then, he promises to intercede for us, to nurture us, and to instruct us.

Samuel is a type of this, but the New Testament affirms it clearly – Christ is interceding for you. He is praying for you. He is advocating for you before God the Father, and God the Father delights in responding to his intercession with grace. Together they send the Holy Spirit to nurture our faith. And then, through his Spirit, Jesus Christ instructs us, his people. Every time we hear his word, from the reading, hearing, or preaching of the Scriptures, it is Christ who is instructing us. He is our ultimate Samuel.

Do you see that? Do you appreciate that?

While this is true throughout the Old Testament, it is especially true here: *Here* we should look at Israel ... and realize that *it is us*. What we have here is a series of events that tell the story of our lives.

It is the big picture story of our lives – it tells our spiritual story from sin to mercy to striving to persevere in faithfulness to God, in reliance on Christ.

It is also the repeated story of our lives – the story of every week of our lives. We live our lives. We try to be faithful. We fall short. And then we gather to be renewed as the people of Christ's kingdom. And we are reminded of God's goodness, and we are recipients again of his grace, and we receive his nurture and instruction in order to go back into the world and try to serve him faithfully once again.

This is our story.

Do you think of it as such?

There are many angles to view our lives from, and many valid ways to tell our story – both in the overall scope and in the week-to-week. We talked last Lord's Day of the big story of the world found in Scripture – of creation, rebellion, redemption, and restoration. And we find a place in that grand story.

But then there is also the story of our lives. The story from sin to salvation. That is the story we see played out in our text, in our worship, and in the gospel. And as such, it should be one of the most important angles by which we see ourselves. This should be one of the core stories of our lives.

And if it's not ... then we need to immerse ourselves in it further. This means attending to the instruction and nurture that Christ offers his people, just as Samuel offered to Israel.

It also means being attentive to the weekly story we live out as well – to be present in worship to experience and to see what is happening here – to walk through the pattern of the gospel again and again in our corporate worship.

Because there *is* a risk of drifting away. We should note that Samuel's words end with a warning: "But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king." If you still do wickedly – if you give up on repenting and embrace your sin, either because you cease to believe in his judgment or you cease to believe in his grace – then you shall be swept away. The threat is real.

And the way to keep from embracing our sin is to rely on the provision offered by God. To cling to the means of grace – the means by which God nurtures our faith and instructs us. To cling to the worship of God's people. To attend to it on our own, yes, but also to come back to God's house and to gather with his people week after week, again and again, longing to be renewed each time.

For our God is a God of renewal. He renews his kingdom. He renews his covenant people. He renews hearts, and minds, and lives.

What could we desire more than to be renewed by him?

And so, let nothing hold us back from him. Let nothing hold us back from Christ who is the source of this renewal. And let nothing hold us back from the kingdom-renewal that is carried out in worship, that is offered to us every Lord's Day, here in the House of our God.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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**For more on "covenant renewal worship":**

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