

1 Samuel 12:1-25

SI: We’re studying the book of 1 Samuel.

It’s a book that shows the failure of men, the power of God
and what it means to live by faith

This chapter is a long speech by Samuel. Let me remind you of the context.
Israel demanded a king—wanted to be like other nations.

Samuel warned them not to insist on it, but they did, so God let them have one.
Told Samuel to anoint Saul privately and give him a charge to strike the first
blow for the liberation of Israel from the Philistines.

Saul didn’t do that, so Samuel called an assembly where Saul was chosen before all
Israel. The Lord touched the hearts of a lot of men and they rallied to Saul.
He had the beginnings of an army, but still didn’t strike Philistines.

So Lord gave Saul a warm up opportunity, a battle against the Ammonites—
not nearly as scary as the Philistines—and Saul was victorious.
Samuel called the people together again to officially crown Saul king.
This is that coronation ceremony and this is Samuel’s speech.

INTRO: I read a short article recently about George Washington.

The author argued that the most important thing Washington did was leave office.

What's so great about leaving office? Surely it matters more what a president does in office. But think about other great military commanders and revolutionary leaders before and after Washington—Caesar, Cromwell, Napoleon, Lenin. They all seized the power they had won and held it until death or military defeat . . . Washington believed in a republic of free citizens, with a government based on consent and established to protect the rights of life, liberty, and property. From his republican values Washington derived his abhorrence of kingship, even for himself. He gave up power not once but twice—at the end of the revolutionary war, when he resigned his military commission and returned to Mount Vernon, and again at the end of his second term as president, when he refused entreaties to seek a third term. In doing so, he set a standard for American presidents that lasted until the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose taste for power was stronger than the 150 years of precedent set by Washington. Give the last word to Washington's great adversary, King George III. The king asked his American painter, Benjamin West, what Washington would do after winning independence. West replied, "They say he will return to his farm." "If he does that," the incredulous monarch said, "he will be the greatest man in the world."

So much hung in the balance when Washington was urged to take that third term. What if Washington had been a different sort of man?

What if he had taken it and then consolidated his power and ruled for life? The last 200 years of our history would be very different and we would be living in a very different country today.

You get the same feeling from this passage that the future of Israel was hanging in the balance.

Samuel's speech marks formal end of the period of the Judges in Israel's history.

Saul had already been anointed, chosen, and crowned king.

But here Samuel formally relinquishes his title as judge of Israel and turns over all governing authority to King Saul and he gives charge to Saul and all Israel.

The charge is: Be faithful to the Lord and to his covenant.

He repeats it three times at the end of his speech.

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!

Do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart.

Be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.

The big questions chapter 12 sets before us are:

Will Saul prove to be a faithful king?

Will the people find that having a king gives them the advantages they hope?

Will this be a step forward for Israel, choosing to have a king instead of judges or will it hurt them?

It's the same sort of political questions that many Americans are asking themselves as November approaches.

Will we have a good leader who is faithful to our founding principles?

Will our president and elected officials help or hurt?

Will he or she promote a free and just society or not?

Interesting how so many of our hopes and fears are connected to political leaders and we sense big things hanging in the balance.

There are some faith lessons from this chapter that help Christians think about American politics, but I don't think that's the primary application of this passage.

Who is Israel today? It's not America—it's the church.

We are the Israel of God, as Paul says, we are the kingdom of priests, holy nation.

This passage is fundamentally about church government, church leadership.

The nations and empires of men all fade away. Even America will fade away.

But our citizenship is in the eternal kingdom of God—

and the visible manifestation of that kingdom is the church.

Every follower of Jesus lives out his or her Christian life within a particular church.

We've all chosen Christ Covenant and the Presbyterian Church in America, at least for this season of our lives.

So let's listen to what Samuel has to say to us concerning the government and leadership of our church.

Two points: I'll give them to you as we go.

Credit where credit is due: Sermon by Dr. Robert Rayburn on passage

MP#1 The thing that counts most is not form of church government but

faithfulness to the Lord and his covenant

When Israel demanded a king, Samuel warned them again and again not to do it, that it was a bad idea.

Samuel told them a king would take, take, take, take.

Take your sons as soldiers and farmers, take your daughters as cooks and perfumers, take your best fields and vineyards for his officials, take a tenth of your produce as taxes.

He told them they were rejecting a better form of government.

The way judges worked was God chose them and raised them up when needed. Wouldn't that be nice in November, if we could let God pick our president?!

Israel insisted on a king anyway so God let them have their wish.

Now this is Samuel's farewell speech as the last judge of Israel and he doesn't sugarcoat things—he repeats everything he's said before—with an emphasis on how this was a bad decision—spiritually and politically.

Samuel asks them: Have I taken anything from anyone? Point—get ready.

But that's not how Samuel finishes the speech.

He finishes by saying that the thing that counts most is not whether Israel is governed by a judge or a king, but that they be faithful to the Lord.

When it comes to church government, I'm a Presbyterian by conviction.

I believe the form of government in the Bible is Presbyterian in its broad outline.

It's government by bodies of elders in graded church courts.

Twenty plus years ago, Allison and I were living in Florida.

I had been an associate pastor four years, felt like time for a pastoral position. So we started praying. Please, Lord, open the door for a good church.

There was a man I had gotten to know named Franklin Sellers.

He and his wife always worshipped at our PCA church when on vacation.

Franklin was presiding bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church, a conservative Episcopal denomination, mostly in Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas.

Presiding Bishop meant he was the head honcho.

We don't have head honchos in Presbyterianism. We're against head honchos.

We believe in boards of elders—Sessions, Presbyteries, General Assemblies.

We believe in joint authority not individual authority.

But the Episcopalians have bishops who carry individual authority—and at the top is the Presiding Bishop who has the final word.

So Bishop Sellers came to see me one day and said:

There is a church in Baltimore with an empty pulpit and I want to make you pastor.

Think about it and let me know.

Allison and I talked about it. It was obviously an answer to prayer.

We had prayed for a good church and this was a good church.

All I had to do was say yes.

But every Presbyterian bone in my body said no.

I didn't want a bishop making me pastor of a church.

I wanted to become a pastor the Presbyterian way with a church calling me and a

Presbytery examining me and approving the call because that's what I believe.

So I declined Bishop Seller's kind offer.

And then a few months later the Lord gave us another answer to prayer which was a Presbyterian church in a little town in north Alabama.

But here's my point:

In spite of my Presbyterian convictions, I would much rather be ruled by a godly bishop like Franklin Sellers than by a session or Presbytery or General Assembly of faithless and gutless Presbyterians.

And there have been plenty of those down through the years.

I would much rather be in an independent, congregational church pastored by a Baptist like John Piper or any number of good Baptist pastors I know in this town than in a Presbyterian church with a pastor who has no reverence for God's word.

If the choice is between Martin Luther and unfaithful Presbyterians—
let's all be Lutherans.

If the choice is between Charles Wesley and unfaithful Presbyterians—
let's all be Methodists.

History has proved that Presbyterian church government as a system
hasn't saved Presbyterians from idolatry and unbelief.

The English Presbyterians in the mid-1600s were strong and faithful.

They produced the Westminster Confession of Faith—vibrant life.

But within a few generations hardly any believing Presbyterians in England.

And there are barely any today.

The Church of Scotland has remained Presbyterian in its government.

But over the past 200 years it has steadily become a church
of nominal Christians and unfaithful ministers and bad theology.

Many American Presbyterians affirm gay theology, feminist theology, goddess
theology—and despise historic, orthodox Christianity.

I had a Presbyterian friend once who started dating a Baptist girl who was from

a good, solid Bible-believing home, and when her father found out he hit the roof. It wasn't an issue of infant baptism for him—the only Presbyterians he knew about were the ones he read about in the newspaper who are pro abortion and who teach all roads lead to god—whoever he or she may be. My friend had to tell him—Not all Presbyterians are like that. Some follow Jesus.

I guess our only consolation is that no other form of church government as a system has a better historical record of protecting the purity of the church. An evangelical Methodist would say the same thing about Methodist government. And evangelical Baptist would say the same thing about his Independency. And so on.

Samuel said the best form of government for Israel was to have judges. And Samuel was certainly right.

But the Judges didn't keep Israel pure. Read the book of Judges.

There was all sorts of foolishness and bad theology among the people of God during that period of time.

Our hope is not in our system, our structure, our government but in the Lord and his covenant with us.

So this chapter does not end with an appeal to a better form of government—it ends with an appeal both to the leaders of the church and the people of the church to remain faithful to God. It has to be both.

It can't just be faithful people and unfaithful leaders.

When that happens, God will preserve a remnant, but church as a whole withers. And it can't be faithful leaders and unfaithful people.

That also happens, leaders trying with all their might to shepherd the flock and the people ignoring them for materialism or whatever.

It has to be what Samuel said—

Both you and the king who reigns over you must follow the Lord your God.

That brings us to the second point concerning the government and leadership of the church

MP#2 Faithfulness to the Lord must be lived out in the middle of things.

In the Christian life you never get to start over.

You have to take things up where they are and go on from there.

After Samuel gives his speech about how they've abandoned the Lord's plan

for them in demanding a king, the Lord sends thunder and rain. It's the wheat harvest time. This was not just unseasonal, it was a sign of the Lord's displeasure. He was saying, you deserve to have crops destroyed for this. One of the curses in Deuteronomy for covenant breaking.

The Lord didn't ruin their crops but it got their attention and they cried out for forgiveness. Asked the Lord to spare them the consequences of their evil choices. They were actually so aware of their guilt, that they asked Samuel to pray for them. They didn't even feel they had the standing to ask God themselves. At that moment they began to understand the magnitude of their decision to demand a king.

But there was no going back.

They couldn't change their minds and say—

Now we see the error of our ways and we don't want a king after all. Lord, please let's go back to the way it was and you choose a judge over us. Samuel's sons are here, we'll take them instead. No. The Lord had confirmed Saul as their king—even though their request itself had been sinful.

So, what did the Israelites have to do?

They had to move ahead into an uncertain, muddy situation and try to be faithful.

That's what we have to do. That's what the church always has to do. I'm speaking in broad terms here. I'm not talking specifically about our congregation or our denomination or any other particular church body. I'm taking about the church in general.

The church carries the accumulated sins of our church fathers—
and many of their bad habits and bad decisions.

There are situations in churches that should have been dealt with a long time ago but they weren't and now they can't be fixed.

Churches with elders who should never have been elders—but have been for years. Ministers who should never have been ordained for ministry—but have.

And getting them out is not even possible in many cases. Even if it were possible, doing would be destructive to church's peace and unity. What is there to do but be faithful to the Lord in the middle of things—
move on as best you can in the situation?

That's what God's faithful people have always had to do.

In the early days of the church, second century, around 140 AD,

barely 100 years after Christ there was a man named Marcion.
He was a heretic. He chopped off parts of the Bible he didn't like.

He especially hated the Old Testament, said God of OT not Father of Christ.
But when he came to Rome, the church leaders there gave him a friendly welcome.

They didn't investigate his views as they should have.
Marcion was extremely wealthy.

He gave a huge donation to the church—the equivalent of \$8 million today.
The Roman church was trying to buy property and it was very expensive so
they took the gift without asking too many questions.
They should have been more careful, but they weren't.

It wasn't long before Marcion started causing all sorts of trouble,
pushing his heretical views, causing division.

So the leaders of the Roman church finally took up the matter and they realized
there were only two options, either Marcion had to repent and renounce his views
or they were going to have to excommunicate him.

He hoped he would repent, but he refused.

Now they were over a barrel because they had already spent the \$8 million.

So they did the only thing they felt they could do—raised \$8 million,
gave it back to Marcion, and then excommunicated him.

They made a bad mistake so they tried to fix it the best they could.

The problem was that by this time Marcion and his teaching was established.
Churches with his teaching were popping up everywhere—wasps making nests.
The leaders of the church did their best in the end.

But their early failure did lots of damage and they couldn't go back and fix it.

You could look at every church, every denomination and will find examples
of places where the leaders and people today are trying to be faithful to God
in the middle of a situations shaped by sinful or simply very unwise decisions.

I could give you some examples from our own denomination—

Some problems we've inherited are from decisions made 200 years ago.
There are many things you wish you could go back and do over.

There are decisions our Session has made that I wish we could do over.
So what do you do?

You could despair over it. You could say everything is ruined.

You could become paralyzed with guilt or fear.

The Israelites started to do that. Got just a glimpse of how wrong it was, fallout.

But look at Samuel's response. It's wonderful.

Do not be afraid—Don't despair, don't be paralyzed, don't think it's all ruined.
You have done all this evil—Look it in the eye, call it what it is, a bad decision.
Yet do not turn away from the Lord but serve the Lord with all your heart.

Don't turn to idols, they can't help you.
Samuel didn't cancel Saul's coronation and start again.

He simply said: Now you have a king. Be faithful to the Lord.
Don't look for a silver bullet to fix things like they were—keep trusting him.

Then he says some wonderful things that we all need to hear.
The Lord will not reject his people, the Lord was pleased to make you his own.
God's not going to reject you, withhold his blessings. He's for you, happy his.
Would you reject your own child for a sin, even if had lasting repercussions?

Then Samuel swears he's going to pray for them, keep teaching them God's will.
To fully appreciate this you have to see Samuel here as a foreshadowing of Christ.
This is exactly what Jesus promises—He intercedes for us. He's praying for us.
Father, help them be faithful in the middle of this new situation.
They've made this muddle, but I still love them, and I know you do.
Teach them by your Word and Spirit so they will make wise decisions.

What's the most important thing?

Not forms and structures and governments—as necessary as they are—
The most important thing is God's grace in Christ Jesus motivating you
to live faithfully for the Lord now, in the middle of things—
in the middle of messes your ancestors have made, or your leaders have made,
or you yourself have made.

And if you take God's grace to heart, and let that grace go in deep and catch fire,
and motivate you to faithfulness, then your decision to take a king or any other
bad decision you make can't hurt you.

This is not just true in our church life together, it's also true of us as Christian
citizens and as individual Christians in our own lives and responsibilities.