

The Weight of the Crown

Consider What Great Things He Has Done for You

1 Samuel 12-13

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"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. 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." 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 your 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. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king" (1 Sam. 12:12-25, ESV).

The book of 1 & 2 Samuel is a story. But it's not a story that is simply meant to entertain or to report what happened. It's so much more than that.

The lives of Samuel, Saul, and David are recorded as inspired Scripture because there are lessons woven throughout the narrative. In other words, this book is a collection of stories designed to teach us, but it's different than a letter like we find in the New Testament.

This is the eighth message in 1 Samuel. Hopefully by now you are starting to get into a rhythm of listening to a sermon about a narrative. It takes a different posture, both for me as the preacher and you as the one listening. In fact, I'm not even sure I like the word "listening." It seems that the word "engaging" might be a better word.

Stories are meant to draw us into the plotline, to invite us to feel the tension of the moment, and to look for the messages being communicated. Frankly, narrative sections require more of both of us. It's important for you to immerse yourself in the story first and allow the applications to emerge. In some respects, narrative sections are more subjective but also more subversive.

That's why Jesus told parables. He would tell a story with a point. Matthew 21 tells us that the Pharisees began to understand that Jesus was speaking about them (see Matt. 21:45). I love how Eugene Peterson describes this:

As people heard Jesus tell these stories . . . {t}hey relaxed their defenses. They walked away perplexed, wondering what they meant, the stories lodged in their imagination. And then, like a time bomb, they would explode in their unprotected hearts. An abyss opened up at their very feet. He *was* talking about God; they had been invaded!¹

But the parable didn't do the work—it put the listener's imagination to work. Parables aren't illustrations that make things easier; they make things harder by requiring the exercise of our imaginations, which if we aren't careful becomes the exercise of our faith. Parables subversively slip past our defenses²

The same thing is happening in 1 Samuel. It requires you to use your imagination, but narrative sermons require restraint and wisdom on my part because we're not attending a class on 1 Samuel. Sermons in this book are more like visiting an art gallery where the learning is connected to the experience. Some information is helpful, but too much structure can feel like a friend who won't stop talking about the symbolism of a movie when you are watching the movie.

Today we are walking through 1 Samuel 12-13, two chapters that are put together in order to make a number of points. So, let's walk through them to see what we can learn.

An Important Exhortation (Ch. 12)

Chapter 12 contains an important exhortation from Samuel to the nation of Israel, and it marks the ending of his prophetic ministry. Samuel is not departing from the scene. He'll still play an important role, but this address marks the moment of the transition from the time of judges to the time of kings.

His farewell message begins with a personal tone. He reviews what brought them to this point in verses 1-3:

- "I have obeyed your voice . . . and have made a king over you"
- "I am old and gray"

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, [*The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*](#), vol. 17, The Leadership Library (Carol Stream, IL; Dallas; Waco, TX: Christianity Today; Word Pub., 1989), 42.

² Ibid.

- “I have walked before you until this day”

It’s hard not to hear Samuel’s words as somewhat coming from a personal place of rejection or maybe concern over where their desire for a king will lead. When I read this text, I wonder if Samuel is trying to be faithful in a situation that he thinks is a really bad scenario.

What’s more, he asks the people to testify about the nature of his spiritual leadership and if he’s used his authority in an oppressive manner. We read the response in verses 4-5:

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 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” (1 Sam. 12:4-5).

This probably harkens back to Samuel’s warning about kings in 1 Samuel 8:10-18. He cautioned them about the likelihood of the king creating a kingdom that “takes” from the people and how they will eventually regret their choice. Doesn’t it seem like Samuel is trying to make a point here? What’s more, it does leave one wondering if Samuel is frustrated that he exercised faithful leadership only to have the people reject him. Not every faithful leader is loved by their people, despite their faithfulness.

Samuel then turns to a more historical perspective. He’s focusing the conversation on the Lord’s faithfulness and appeals to them to follow the Lord, to learn from the mistakes and patterns of the past: “. . . that I may plead with you before the Lord concerning all the righteous deeds of the Lord that he performed for you and your fathers” (v. 7). He uses two historical examples.

First (vv. 6-9a), he cites the oppression in Egypt. God heard the cries of his people, and he delivered them. But it didn’t result in faithfulness. It resulted in rebellion.

. . . 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 (1 Sam. 12:8b-9a).

That’s the pattern repeated over and over throughout the Bible. Cry out for help. Divine deliverance. Forget God. Why does this happen? It’s because human beings want relief from hardship, and when we get it, we take it for granted. More specifically we cry out to God for help, but when he grants us what we want, it’s easy to forget him. It’s like a friend who only reaches out when he or she needs something.

The second example (vv. 9-11) relates to their time in the land of Israel. The opposition of Sisera, the Philistines, and the Moabites created a crying out to the Lord: “We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord and have served the Baals and Ashtaroh. But now deliver us out the hand of our enemies that we may serve you” (v. 10). God sent a series of prophets/judges, including Samuel. The pattern keeps repeating.

Samuel then brings the teaching up to the present. In verses 12-13, he recounts the previous situation with Nahash the Ammonite. This is the context in which Israel demanded a king. And it’s here that Samuel issues his clearest warning:

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 (1 Sam. 12:13-15).

To reinforce this point, God (through Samuel) affirmed this word with a miraculous thunderstorm that instilled fear in the hearts of the people. And when the people realized what they'd done with asking for a king, Samuel reinforced his main point in verses 20-22:

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 your 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" (1 Sam. 12:20-22).

And after promising that he will continue to pray for them and teach them, he makes the same point a third time in verses 24-25.

Only fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king (1 Sam. 12:24-25).

Did you engage with Samuel's caution? It's important to consider because the condition of humanity hasn't materially changed since the days of the Old Testament. We too need to heed the warning to serve the Lord with all our heart and not to turn aside after things that cannot profit or deliver. What might this look like? It can look like anything to which we turn when the pressure is on, when we feel threatened, or when we start to panic. It's anything to which we look for deliverance instead of the Lord. It could sound like:

- I just need a new friend, boss, job, counselor, relationship, church, or political leader.
- If only I had more money, a better vacation, more affirmation, or better friends.

None of these things are necessarily bad. But they are empty. And the key is to make our priority following the Lord as the baseline of our lives. In other words, not swapping out trusting God for a new relationship, more money, a political leader, a better vacation, or more affirmation.

The caution here is this: Be careful where you turn when the pressure is on or when life gets easy.

A Disastrous Illustration (Ch. 13)

It's fascinating that what follows the previous instruction is another story that illustrates the caution that Samuel just gave, but it focuses on the behavior of King Saul. He has begun his reign, but it's not long—only two years (v. 1)—until there's a problem.

The context is a military victory over the Philistine garrison in Geba and an announcement that spread over Israel (v. 3). However, it created a conflict with the Philistines that required Saul calling his people back to Gilgal in preparation for battle (v. 4). Here comes the pressure.

The Philistines marshalled an armed response: 30,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen. According to verse 6, the people responded by hiding anywhere they could find: caves, holes, rocks, tombs, and cisterns. What's more, some of the people deserted Saul and fled to the other side of the Jordan (v. 7). His forces were trembling. Saul was off to a very rough start. Not the way to start off a strong reign. His first major territory victory resulted in a serious conflict with the Philistines.

According to verse 8, Saul waited seven days for Samuel to come to Gilgal. In the meantime, Saul was bleeding people—"they were scattering from him." In a panic, Saul decided to offer a series of sacrifices himself, something he was not permitted to do. Commentators suggest that either Saul was careless, disobedient, or he may have been challenging Samuel's authority. Regardless, it was out of line. The sacrifices were designed to entreat God's favor before battle, but Saul was operating outside of his kingly role. His desperation created compromise.

Now, before you're too hard on Saul, listen to commentator John Woodhouse's assessment. He's no fan of Saul's decision. But the pressure was real.

To obey God, for Saul, was an *extraordinary* thing to ask, considering the circumstances. We might reasonably say that it was close to impossible. Why? Because to obey God in those circumstances would have required him to *trust God* against every instinct, against every evidence, and against every aspect of his experience at that moment. The Philistines were coming in massive numbers, the Israelites were slipping away, and everyone was terrified! What a huge mistake it is to think that to obey God is an easy thing to do. Trusting God is neither straightforward nor simple.³

Suddenly (v. 11), Samuel appeared. And when he asked Saul what he had done, his answer was instructive:

Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering" (1 Sam. 13:11-12).

What do you hear in this? Oh my. There's a lot. Saul was responding in fear that he'd lose the momentum. He wanted the favor of the Lord. So, he forced himself to offer an unworthy sacrifice. It

³ John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 234–235.

sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Our rationale for disobedience usually sounds stupid when the pressure is off. Mark it down somewhere: desperation and panic can cloud our judgment.

Samuel's rebuke to Saul was direct and tragic.

And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you. For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you" (1 Sam. 13:13-14).

The reign of Saul has barely begun, and we see the massive problems with this decision to desire a king. This story is an illustration of what Samuel warned the people about. Chapters 12-13 are a cautionary story of forgetting the value of obedience to God.

Summary Applications

I hope you've been listening carefully and engaging with this story, drawing your own lessons. But let me give you a few lessons about God and us to consider:

1. Be careful with what you desire and what you fear.

The first thing to consider is the frequent pattern with God's people in the Old and New Testaments related to our desires and fears. These are powerful realities, and they can be used for good. But they can also take over your life. James warns about misplaced desires and how they lead to more sin (James 4:1-4). Jesus encouraged his disciples not to give into fear (Luke 12:4-7), and he promised that he would always be with us (Matt. 28:16-20). Your desires and fears are most dangerous when unknown, unarticulated, and unconsidered. Be careful when you feel wants and fears rising in your soul as they can easily lead to disobedience. Ask yourself "What do I want?" and "What do I fear?" And take that to the Lord.

2. Faithfulness to the Lord transcends circumstances.

Human desires and fears have a context. And it can be easy to think that what we really need is a change of circumstances to be at peace, feel successful, be complete, or feel safe. We can long for a different relationship, job, boss, friends, church, or political leader. And while sometimes a change in circumstances might be helpful or even right, there is one thing that must be constant: faithfulness to the Lord. In other words, God's aim for the Christian is to demonstrate faithfulness in all circumstances, including when you really want something and when you are really scared.

Let me summarize this entire message with this: "Follow the Lord, and it will be well" (1 Sam. 12:14b).

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