

1 Samuel 12:1-25

We're back again this evening in 1 Samuel - it's part of the sermon series entitled, 'Looking for a Leader' ... you will see in your Bible that this chapter is billed as 'Samuel's Farewell Speech.' Let's be clear - it's not the end of Samuel, far from it - the curtain is coming down on his role as a judge; but, as a premier prophet, he still has a vitally important part to play in the unfolding drama of God's purposes - there's no doubt, he continued to wield tremendous influence into the future; you can read all about that in the chapters which immediately follow - chapters 13-15 refer to his interaction with Saul when he told him a few home truths, and also in chapter 16 when he anointed David as the king in waiting. Samuel never did see David take up the throne, as he died in 1 Samuel 25 where we read that 'all Israel assembled and mourned for him' - a kind of footnote appears in Hebrews 11:32 where he is hailed and honoured as a man of faith. He's up there with the best of men and women. These words signal the end of an era ... Samuel was the last of the judges and, because of that, he stood between the past and the future. The guard was changing! So, his final speech marked the passing of the Hebrew republic ... a case of out with the old and in with the new! The people of Israel were on the verge of a new era, under a new regime, with Saul in the driving

'Samuel's Swan Song'

seat - this generation stood on the threshold of a season of great unknowns - this was virgin soil for them - why? Because the people voiced their feelings in chapter 8, and God gave them exactly what they wanted ... we read in 13:1 that 'Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty-two years.' As I said, Samuel was a key player in the history of God's covenant people - even though he was riding into the sunset, his shadow would still be cast across the land for many a long year - so, in that sense, he was yesterday's man. The good thing is, and it's worth noting ... unlike many of us of a certain vintage, Samuel didn't overstay his welcome - he knew when it was time for him to stand down, to step aside, and move on ... The words of his swan song should be recalled and remembered by us all. Why? Because they remind us of the unfolding story of God: a God who loves and delivers, a God who is holy and pure, and a God who works miracles when he redeems an undeserving people. They also show us the value and the blessing of finishing well ... we know from verse 2 that, in his own words, Samuel is an old man with grey hair (sounds and looks familiar, eh) - so many things have taken their toll on him: the ravages of time, his disappointment that his sons didn't walk in the ways of the Lord, the pressure of being on the frontline for decades, a nation

who failed to honour God in their choices ... all this and so much more ... no wonder he's aged and looks the worse for wear!

And yet, in the space of 25 verses, here he is recounting the favour of God, he is rehearsing the shenanigans of a faithless and foolish people who wanted to do things their own way, and he is resolutely affirming the big plusses of obeying the God of their fathers.

So let's unpack the chapter and see what lessons we can learn from Samuel's valedictory speech at Gilgal - I have to say, reading through it, it's a tad Churchillian in parts - and, in verse 3, I was reminded of Martin Luther when he famously said at Wittenberg in 1517, 'Here I stand' ... you can read something similar from the likes of Moses, and Joshua, and David. To round it off, there's a rousing challenge at the end of verse 24 for the people to 'consider what great things [the Lord] has done for [them].'

So far as Samuel is concerned, this is *not* what we would call, a parting shot, but it *is* a parting speech - and there's a big difference between the two! When you break it down, there are five parts to it - one, a time to **reflect** in verses 1-5; two, a time to **retell** and **remember** in verses 6-13; three, a time to **refocus** in verses 14-18; four, a time to **repent** in verse 19; and, five, a time for **renewal** in verses 20-25. So, first of all:

1. A time to reflect (1-5)

And that's exactly what Samuel is doing here - it reminds me of a court of law where Samuel has

put himself in the dock; he wants the people to testify for him or against him. At stake here, for Samuel, is his personal integrity.

Before he picks up his P45, Samuel needs to know that all Israel knows that he has behaved in an exemplary manner at all times. It seems to me, there's no point in them crying foul when he's gone. You see, they're the ones who wanted a king, not him ... after a month or two when Saul's honeymoon is over, if things don't work out the way they'd hoped and their dreams have turned to nightmares, they can't turn round and blame Samuel!

That's the rationale behind his salvo of questions in verse 3 ... Have I cheated you in any way or conned you at any time? Have I done any underhand deals with you? Have I treated you with contempt, or have I made fish of one and flesh of another? Have I lined my own pockets and feathered my own nest at your expense?

And the response from the people in verses 4-5 is clearcut - it is unanimous, it is unequivocal - they've given Samuel a clean bill of health. On a human level, it was a high risk strategy which he deployed, but, he was a good, godly, and gifted leader with no skeletons in the closet. He had nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of. He was a man of unimpeachable integrity.

As the servant of God, he was above and beyond reproach. His testimony was unsullied. And for a leader, that is absolutely the bottom line.

2. A time to retell and remember (6-13)

So, having cleared the air with regard to himself, see what he does next: he goes on the front foot and gives them a history lesson; he shares with them a handful of stories of God's faithfulness. Why? Because he wanted to remind them that they were simply one frame in the film of God's ongoing relationship with his people.

Samuel highlights what he calls in verse 7, 'the righteous acts performed by the Lord' on their behalf. And the stories go back a long time - back as far as Moses and Aaron ...

He spans the centuries, from their deliverance out of Egypt, to the days of the judges, right up to what happened in chapter 11 and the messy incident involving Nahash the Ammonite. It's a sad and sorry tale that's repeated over and over again - they get into big trouble, they call on the Lord, and he gets them out of a tight corner! He is the God who saves, who rescues! God helps his people, he supports his people. And with the passing of time, that hasn't changed - our God is still on the throne, he has your back, 24/7.

Such is God's faithfulness to his covenant people - even when they don't deserve it and suffer the scourge of amnesia, he still acts on their behalf. He hears their cries for help, and he steps into the situation and answers prayer. Ah, that was true for them ... but it's no less a reality in your life and mine! I'm reminded of the sweet truth that 'our sins, they are many, his mercy is more.'

There's a time to reflect, that's followed by a time to retell and remember ... there's:

3. A time to refocus (14-18)

You can see what's happening here - the line is drawn in the sand, there's no going back; they've made their choice, they've got their man - a big man by all accounts, they're impressed - verse 13 spells it out. No longer is their strap-line, 'In God we trust' - now it's more a case of, 'In Saul we trust.' And that's a big mistake!

You can't depend on man, but you can always depend on God - look again at verse 13 to see how it all pans out - 'the king you have chosen, the one you asked for' - but, here's the truth of the matter, 'see, the Lord has set a king over you.' A reminder that our God is the one who is pulling all the strings - he is sovereign.

There's a glimpse of the astonishing grace of a faithful God in verses 14/15 ... they've erred and opted for second best, they've blown it big time, sure they have, but the alternatives offered were clear for people and for king, and they show us a cameo of the kindness of God ... the High King of heaven puts his cards on the table, as it were ...

They could live faithfully under the word of the Lord by doing what God wants them to do (14) - if they do, they will enjoy and experience God's blessings; or they could rebel, go their own way, do their own thing, and face the consequences - in that instance, they would suffer justly under the hand of the Lord (15).

This is so encouraging as it shows us that the God of the covenant gives them some leeway ... he certainly does not condone their sin when

they rejected him as their King, but he's willing to play ball with them from now on, so long as they abide by the rules. He's the God of the second chance!

Having laid it on the line, Samuel ups the ante, he changes gear and drives home the point that God is very much in charge, when he says: 'Now then, stand still and see this great thing the Lord is about to do before your eyes.'

It seems to me that what happens next is an act of God, miraculous and momentous, since it's the time of the wheat harvest ... around May-June in the agricultural calendar. It was the start of the dry season - the people knew that rain was extremely rare at this time - for you and me, something like six inches of snow in Doncaster in early summer! It just doesn't happen!

Old Samuel prayed, and we read, on 'that same day the Lord sent thunder and rain.' The great Creator turns on the taps and there is a thunderstorm the like of which they've never known before! It's deafening. They're drenched. They're soaked to the skin. A reminder to them that God rules - that he calls all the shots - that he does what he does because he is who he is! Such awesome power! No wonder the biblical record states that 'the people stood in awe of the Lord and Samuel' (18).

There's a time to reflect, a time to retell and remember, and a time to refocus on the big picture and a big God ... there's:

4. A time to repent (19)

That's why God did what he did - he grabbed their attention, he scared the daylights out of them - you can see their response in verse 19 - they know they have sinned in 'asking for a king' ... the lessons are: one, we need to see sin from God's perspective and name it for what it is; two, God will do whatever he needs to do to bring us to our senses and to lead us back to himself.

It was the fear of God's righteous anger which opened the door to repentance ... so here we catch sight of what Paul called, the kindness and the severity of God in his dealings with them. It's the juicy carrot of his kindness and the stick of his severity. He wants us to tremble because of our sin, but his ultimate aim is to see us restored - to quote John Newton, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear ...'

That brings us to our final point:

5. A time for renewal (20-25)

I have to say that Samuel's reply is completely unexpected, and that's an understatement. It took me by surprise ... I had to go back and read it a second and third time! 'Do not be afraid,' he said in verse 20!

The people have rocked the boat, they plotted their own course and now they're all at sea - a course that smacks of arrogance and rebellion. The question is, What does God say to them when they own up to the ugliness of their sin? He says, 'Do not be afraid. You've done all this evil, yet ...' Ah, to quote from Jeremiah 29, for them, here is a future and a hope!

His full answer spans six verses, but we can summarise it like this: You don't go back and wallow in your guilt, you don't relive the tragic mistakes of the past, you don't punch the replay button and go over the whole messy episode in lurid and precise detail ... that's what you don't do! And there's more ... you don't go after other gods or worship useless idols because they can do you no good and do nothing for you ... in other words, don't waste your time and energy on things that don't matter!

But, he says, and this is where he cuts to the chase - see verse 20, you are to 'worship the Lord with all your heart.' If they didn't get it first time, he says it a second time in verse 24, 'be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart ...'

In other words, in spite of all their yesterdays, and their colourful and chequered past history, from this day forward he wants them (and us) to serve God with simple fidelity. That, my friend, is where God's grace is so amazing.

It begs the question, How can God be like that? How can he possibly say to such wayward people, 'Do not be afraid?' I mean, why will God still have truck with people who've committed treason against him? Big questions! One answer - because he is the covenant God!

That's the reason why, and it's spelled out for us in 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.' From day one

it was God's bright idea to have a people whom he could call his own ... even though they've not always been loyal to him, he has never wavered in his commitment to them - he cannot walk out on them - he will not leave them or trash them ... when all is said and done, it's his reputation, the honour of his name, that is at stake!

Isn't that beautiful ... you see, for them, and for you and me, here is grace that is greater than all our sin! We can't turn back the clock, but we can accept a fresh outpouring of God's grace into our lives ... we can't silence the epic truth of verse 22 for, as Dale Ralph Davis says, 'God can make it blink at you in neon if he must.' The same truth is highlighted by Paul in Romans 5:20, where we read: '... where sin increased, grace increased all the more.' Such is the extravagance of grace.

No other motivation should be needed - when we pause for a moment or two in our busy lives, when we take time to count our blessings, there can be no other response from our hearts - we serve him from a heart filled with thankfulness, and overflowing with an abundance of mercies, new every morning! Our cup is full and running over!

One last thought ... even when we reach the ripe old age of Samuel, and we think our time is up, we convince ourselves that our best days are behind us, we bemoan the fact that we can't do what we used to do ...

like Samuel, you may be struggling with all the changes that are happening around you, and you

may feel as if you are being slowly shunted into the sidings ... don't lose heart, there's a priceless work for Jesus you can still do - and it's there in verse 23 ...

we can tune our hearts to sing God's grace, we can faithfully pray for others, and we can still be a guiding light to those around us on the journey of life. If you're doing that, you'll be busy!

I have no idea what's going on in your life right now ... you may even be humming your swan song ... but here we are, about to break bread together, about to remember all that a greater than Samuel did for us at Calvary - for each one of us, this can be our Gilgal, a place of renewal; even more so, when we home in on 'the great things he has done for us' ...