

Crisis Christianity

1 Samuel 12:1-22

It was a day of singing and celebration. For long years, God's people had fought back desperate fears. Nahash, ruler over the savage hordes of Ammon, was always on the edge of their minds. Waking and sleeping, the Israelites watched the horizon for clouds of dust from Ammonite camel cavalries and worried.

But now all of that was behind them. In one morning, their new king had sent the sons of Ammon scrambling back to their desert home.

Doubts had drained away too. Only a few said it out loud. But many Jews wondered if the big farm boy from Gilead really could deliver them from all their enemies.

Now they knew. So Samuel gathered them all at Gilgal. There, the old prophet reaffirmed Saul as king over all Israel. And the people could not have been more pleased.

So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal. There they also offered sacrifices of peace offerings before the Lord; and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly. 1 Samuel 11:15

In their elation and exaltation, the people forgot all about the ice in Samuel's eyes when they demanded a king. So Samuel reminded them.

Then Samuel said to all Israel, "Behold, I have listened to your voice in all that you said to me and I have appointed a king over you." Verse 1

The people smiled and nodded. But their smiles faded when old prophet reminded them that demanding a king was also a rejection of him as the God's judge over them.

Worse yet, they had done so without cause. Since he was a little boy, Samuel had served God by serving his people. And in all that time, the people could find no complaint with His leadership. He had always been straight and steady and selfless.

"Here I am; bear witness against me before the Lord and 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? I will restore it to you."

They said, "You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from any man's hand." Verses 3-4

Samuel made them swear before God. In all his years as judge, they had no complaint about the way he ruled over them.

The people were puzzled at the old man's words. Why bring that up now, they wondered. Everything is different now. We have a king.

But in reality, nothing was changed. Nothing at all.

The Pattern

The little boy who heard the Lord speak his name at Shiloh was an old man. And one last time, he stood up to speak to all of Israel.

It was not a fond farewell speech. Samuel was worried that God's people would not be able to withstand the withering test of peace and prosperity.

His worries were well founded. Throughout the reigns of Moses, Joshua and all the judges, the Jews were yet to stand true to God under soft skies. Time and time again, it was pain and poverty, blood and bondage that drove Israel to cry out to the God of their fathers.

So now, take your stand, that I may plead with you before the Lord concerning all the righteous acts of the Lord which He did for you and your fathers. When Jacob went into Egypt and your fathers cried out to the Lord, then the Lord sent Moses and Aaron who brought your fathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place. Verses 7-8

Jacob was a very old man when famine forced him to take his family into Egypt. For a while, things went well there, too. But then Jacob's son, Joseph died. And Israel became a nation of slaves, toiling their lives away in the slime pits and brick kilns of Goshen.

Centuries inched by. But life did not become better for Israel. Egyptian whips were still red with Jewish blood. And all hope was gone.

So they cried out to the great God their forefathers served. And He heard them. In a letter to the King of Edom, Moses summed it simply.

...our fathers went down to Egypt, and we stayed in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians treated us and our fathers badly. But when we cried out to the Lord, He heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out from Egypt; Numbers 20:15-16

That should have been the beginning of a happy-ever-after ending. But it was not. Once God's people were on the eastern shore of the Red Sea, their rejoicing became rebellion. They hated the food God provided. And they loathed the leaders He appointed to rule over them.

Then and now, the result of rebellion is the same. God is light and love. So turning away from Him is choosing darkness and despair.

That is what happened to Israel. When they forgot and forsook their God, savage enemies slaughtered and enslaved them.

But they forgot the Lord their God, so He sold them into the hand of Sisera, captain of the army of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the king of Moab, and they fought against them. Verse 9

So once again, they cried out to God, confessing and repenting of their sinfulness. And true to His infinite kindness and compassion, the Lord delivered His people once again.

They cried out to the Lord and said, "We have sinned because we have forsaken the Lord and have served the Baals and the Ashteroth; but now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve You." Then the Lord sent Jerubbaal and Bedan and Jephthah and Samuel, and delivered you from the hands of your enemies all around, so that you lived in security. Verses 10-11

So the cycle came full circle. It was not a one-time affair, either. It was a pattern that was repeated again and again from generation to generation. Nehemiah summed it up well.

...when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors. But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You; therefore You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven, and many times You rescued them according to Your compassion, Nehemiah 9:27-28

That pattern of peace and prosperity, oppression and bondage, and repentance and relying upon God was a never-ending cycle with Israel.

It is also the way some saints live today. When we are overwhelmed by the grinding guilt and the bitter fruits of our sin, we cry out to God. And in His great love, He delivers us from all our pain and problems.

But all too often, we cannot seem stand faithful to God when His blessings overflow in our lives. And we soon forget all about loving and trusting and serving the Lord who loves us.

But sin and selfishness always opens a door to the devil. And we find sorrow not satisfaction. So, blinking back tears, we return to God. We beg His forgiveness and forsake our sin. And once again, our loving Lord pours His blessings into our lives.

We might call that crisis Christianity. That was Israel's problem. And all too often, it is also ours. We cannot seem to stand true to God when He gives us peace and prosperity.

In a sense, such a roller coaster faith was understandable in Israel. They served God by their own efforts.

But we do not. Our Savior's very own Spirit lives within us. We serve Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. He gives us all the power and ability we need to be strong and steady children of God.

So we are without excuse.

The Presumptions

Time and time again, God delivered His people from their sorrow and suffering And He always did so the same way. He called and commissioned men to lead His people back to their Lord.

Time and time again, men like Moses and Joshua, Gideon and Jephthah brought deliverance to God's people. Now Nahash and the slashing swords of Ammon threatened. And once again, the people were terrified.

But they should not have been. After all, Samuel was God's appointed judge over them. And he had already delivered them from the Philistines. Nevertheless, Israel demanded a warrior king.

When you saw that Nahash the king of the sons of Ammon came against you, you said to me, "No, but a king shall reign over us," although the Lord your God was your king. Verse 12

The people of Israel did indeed get a conquering king to rule over them. But they did not really get what they wanted. They wanted a king like the rulers who reigned over the pagan peoples all around them, people who neither knew nor belonged to the Lord.

Beneath all the posturing and pretense, what the people really wanted was to be rid of God Himself. They saw the pattern of victory and defeat as clearly as Samuel did. They knew God delivered them only when they turned away from their selfish, sinful ways.

And they wanted to break the pattern of tragedy and triumph. But they did not want to do it God's way: by standing true to Him in good times as well as bad.

So they demanded a king to rule over them. They knew Samuel had been faithful to God. And in a sense, that was the problem. He was God's appointed ruler. He ruled as an agent of the Lord.

Israel entertained a foolish fantasy. They believed that since they were ruled by a king, the old requirements no longer applied. Now victory would not depend upon their faithfulness to God.

After all, they were not living under a judge, but under a king. And that was different. The old rules no longer applied.

Samuel was determined to dispel that myth. In times past, God's people followed their Lord into peace and prosperity. And when they forsook Him, they suffered defeat and despair, pain and problems.

That was the pattern with Israel's fathers. And now, Samuel insisted, even though they were ruled by a king, it still would.

If you will fear the Lord and serve Him, and listen to His voice and not rebel against the command of the Lord, then both you and also the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God. If you will not listen to the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the command of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you, as it was against your fathers. Verses 14-15

We dare not look down upon the people of Israel. Many Christians today believe the same lie. Yes, God did judge Israel for their sin, they say. But they were living under the Law.

We are living under God's grace. We are made perfect, not by our own efforts but by Jesus Christ. So the old rules do not apply to us.

God does not judge us when we sin, they smile. But they are wrong. And God's Word clearly says so.

Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines and He scourges every son whom He receives. Hebrews 12:6

If we have sincerely committed our life to Jesus Christ, we have not only been cleansed of our sins and transformed into His image. We have also been adopted into God's eternal family.

And our faithful Father never smiles when His children poison themselves with sin. Instead, He allows them to experience all the despair and defeat that serving Satan inevitably brings.

But that was not the only lie the people of Israel believed. They looked upon Saul's victory over Ammon as proof that they could reject God's lordship over their lives and still have peace and prosperity.

Samuel could see that lie in the eyes of the people who stood before him. And he was determined to dispel it.

Even now, take your stand and see this great thing which the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call to the Lord, that He may send thunder and rain. Then you will know and see that your wickedness is great which you have done in the sight of the Lord by asking for yourselves a king." So Samuel called to the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. Verses 16-18

The sea of faces before Samuel at Gilgal were flushed and fresh with joy. But it was a joy built upon a lie. They had been told they had greatly sinned by demanding a king.

But now their armies had defeated their savage enemies. So, even though they sinned, it seemed God was not really angry with them at all. To prove how false and foolish that idea was, Samuel called upon God to send a savage storm of rain and thunder at the very height of the dry season. Under a sky that was clear and cloudless from horizon to horizon, the old man prayed.

And in an instant, dark clouds boiled and billowed overhead. Then rain came in a torrent and thunder echoed across the plain.

The people were stunned and shocked. What they thought was God's approval was a myth.

Then all the people said to Samuel, "Pray for your servants to the Lord your God, so that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil by asking for ourselves a king." Verse 19

Samuel's message hit home. And the people finally understood. God might withhold His anger over our sin. But that does not mean we are free to sin as we choose. God is able to judge our sins at any moment.

And when temptations are strong, we must not forget it.

The Promise

The people fell to the ground and begged Samuel to pray for them. They finally understood. Their very lives were in the hand of God. And they feared they would be swept away from His presence for all time.

In Egypt, Jacob's descendants lived in terror of their slave drivers' whips. Now they were fearing God in the very same way. And that was not only unhealthy; it was unacceptable.

Samuel said to the people, "Do not fear. You have committed all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart." Verse 20

Samuel urged Israel not to be drowned in despair over their sinful hearts and their sinful ways. Instead, they must renew their commitment to follow their God with all their heart.

And a fresh knowledge of God's judgement of our sin is but one reason why believers of every age must do that. Samuel added another reason why God's people should stand with Him in faith and love with a complete commitment both in sunshine and in storms.

You must not turn aside, for then you would go after futile things which can not profit or deliver, because they are futile. Verse 21

What was true for Israel is just as true for us. God's people do not merely turn away from God. They forsake Him for something else.

For Israel, the attraction was idol worship. For us it might be pleasure or possessions, pride or popularity. But no matter what might lead us astray, one thing stands true. Whatever we follow after instead of God will not produce the blessings we seek.

There is satisfaction, security and joy only in God. It makes no difference what else we might seek and serve. It is empty, vain and futile.

Before he finished, the old prophet added one last reason why those who belong to God should seek and serve and stand for Him with all their heart.

For the Lord will not abandon His people on account of His great name, because the Lord has been pleased to make you a people for Himself. Verse 22

When Samuel began to speak, he clearly said his purpose was to plead with Israel.

So now, take your stand, that I may plead with you before the Lord concerning all the righteous acts of the Lord which He did for you and your fathers. Verse 7

God had been righteous both when He delivered His people and when he disciplined them. That what true then, and it still is.

Israel did not have to worry that their God would abandon and disown them. And we do not have to worry that our Savior will become so sick of our sin He will disown us.

...for He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Hebrews 13:5 (ESV)

We might fail God a thousand times. But He will never fail us. After all, like Israel, we did not choose God; He chose us. We were not included in His forever family because of any good in us. We are God's children because of His Son's perfect life, sacrificial death, and victory over the grave.

We owe everything we are and everything we have to the blessed name of Jesus. He is our all in all. Remembering that ought to make us want to stand true to Him under both sunny and stormy skies.