

1 SAMUEL 12 - SAMUEL'S FAREWELL

Study 13

FAITHFUL OR SUCCESSFUL?

I recently read a story about Hungarian Christians under Communism. A young lady was the first in her family to attend university. Namely, because the communists had implemented policies against the Christians to marginalise them from society.

You were permitted to pray at home and even to get baptized and attend church. However, you had a choice. She says "You could be a Christian or you could be successful." After the fall of communism she was able to attend university.

It's doubtless a position many Christians have faced. As well as a contrast we see in chapter 12. Israel wanted a king 'like all the other nations.' In doing so they pursued the success of the world. In this action, they rejected their faithful prophet, and their faithful God.

The chapter begins with Samuel defending his faithfulness (1 Sam. 12:1-3). He has led with character and integrity. It reminds Christians of the value of a good name.

Israel responds to Samuel by vindicating him, that is, acknowledging his faithfulness (1 Sam. 12:4-5).

There is a crafty setup in Samuel's confession of faithfulness. Namely, as Israel acknowledged Samuel's innocence, they inadvertently acknowledged their own guilt. Their guilt is emphasised, the request for a king was due to unbelief, not from and unfaithfulness on Samuel's behalf.

READ 1 Samuel 12:1-5

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. Describes the aspects of Samuel's faithful character.
3. An emphasis on these verses is Saul's faithfulness. What practical things have you done, or could do to help live a faithful life?

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Now that Samuel has defended his innocence, he now charges Israel with a crime. He does so by providing a history lesson comparing God's faithfulness with Israel's unfaithfulness.

Israel had a pattern of rebellion, and suffering the consequences, after which they would cry out to God for deliverance (1 Sam. 12:6-11). But now, the current crisis apparently seems to be the worst they have encountered. Has God ever encountered an enemy like Nahash? Could God deliver Israel from Nahash? Apparently not! Israel requests an earthly (1 Sam. 12:11). Israel pursued success instead of faithfulness.

We don't need to face an Ammonite army to become disobedient. It's possible that whenever we are faced with the latest crisis, we quietly think, "In this he cannot provide; he has no provision for me in this." It is all very silent, private, low-key, and faithless.

READ 1 Samuel 12:6-15

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. Why is it that, even when God reasons with people in a totally convincing way, they so often fail to accept what he says?
3. Israel chose success (in the form of a king) over faithfulness. What are the modern equivalents of this choice?
4. Read verses 13-16. How is faithfulness to God described?

FEAR CAUSED BY UNFAITHFULNESS

As God's Prophet, not only did Samuel speak for God, but he had the power to perform miracles. Samuel deemed that this farewell address was a good time for a display of God's power (1 Sam 16-17). The mention of the 'wheat harvest' indicates a time on the calendar when storms would have been rare. Samuel didn't get lucky with his timing! This was a miracle that acted as a visual aid for his message that Israel had been unfaithful.

The Israelites sincerely confess their sin. They acknowledge that the history is one of rebellion, and that their sin was heightened as they requested a king (1 Sam. 12:19).

Is it wrong to be motivated by fear when turning to God? Paul appeals to this very logic in Colossians 3:5-6. Ralph Davis writes,

What matters is whether there is a true basis for fear. If there is reason to tremble, we ought to tremble. Neither the church nor individual Christians should be above truthful terror. If God grants us a sight of our own sin and of his displeasure, we can be sure he does not do so merely to see us tremble but to see us tremble and be restored.

READ 1 Samuel 12:16-19

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. We do not like either pain or fear very much. If however pain has its purpose in alerting us to illness or bodily damage, what is fear's God-ordained function?

THE GRACE UPON US

What does God do when his people have been unfaithful? When they have chosen success, or comfort, or security over being faithful? What does he say to his people when they have apparently come to see how ugly their sin really is? He says, "Don't be afraid"; he says, "You have done all this evil, yet ..." (v. 20). God is gracious to forgive sin and provide a hope and a future.

How can God be like that? Because he is a covenant-keeping God (1 Sam. 12:22). He has chosen for himself a family, and he has committed to remain faithful to that family. His great name is at stake should he allow his family to fail. His reputation is wrapped up in his people.

READ 1 Samuel 12:20-25

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. We think of our need of God's grace at the time of our conversion to Christ, but is it not just as true that we need it constantly as we live the Christian life? What do you think?
3. Why is it good news that God acts for the 'sake of his great name'?