

A Fresh Start

1 Samuel 12:1-25

New beginnings often have that element of newness and freshness and anticipation – maybe even excitement. There's a sense of looking forward to the future – the idea of focusing on what's to come. Remember your days at school? The beginning of each year brought a fresh start. There was a new class – a new classroom – a new teacher – new materials – a new set of textbooks – new exercise books. Those exercise books had nothing in them – so you could dream of what they'd be like: neat writing, no mistakes, accurate work, no rushed efforts, no messy corrections, great comments from the teacher. And they'd stay like that – until you had your first lesson and rushed to get everything done so you'd get out to lunch on time.

Many areas of life are like that.

- Starting at a new job.
- Moving into a new home.
- Changing careers.
- Beginning a new hobby.
- Going out on a first date.
- Starting a new sport or with a new team.

There's the chance to leave the past behind and begin afresh. People don't have any preconceived ideas about you. You don't have your past mistakes to dog you. They don't know you were lazy in your last job. They don't know you used to play loud music at 2am. They don't know you're good at scoring own goals. You can leave that behind, turn over a new leaf and make a fresh start.

Except, of course, you're still you. You still take yourself

into the new situation. You still have all your faults and weaknesses. Unless you do a serious remodelling job on yourself, it won't be long before you make the same mistakes and this new lot of people will think exactly the same about you as the old lot. Wherever you go, your character goes with you.

Israel's about to make a fresh start. Five chapters of 1 Samuel cover this transition to the monarchy.

- Chapter 8 tells us about Israel's request for a king like the nations – a request that was a rejection of God's rule over them.
- Chapter 9 and the first half of chapter 10 tell us about the king God chooses for them – a king who's anointed privately by Samuel and equipped by God.
- The second half of chapter 10 tells us about the public choosing of Saul as king.
- Chapter 11 shows us Saul acting as king – how Saul leads the army against the enemies of an Israelite city and wins a great battle.

Now in chapter 12 we get the official changing of the guard. The old leader officially hands over to the new leader. As they make a fresh start, Samuel invites them to do a serious remodelling job on themselves.

Samuel's History

Before he gets to that, however, Samuel begins with himself as the old leader. Verses 1 to 5:

Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I

stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and His anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right."

"You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied.

"You have not taken anything from anyone's hand."

Samuel said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and also His anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand."

"He is witness," they said.

Samuel's been a leader for a long time. We haven't been given details of great slabs of his life – just a few snapshots here and there. Basically, the snapshots have all been fairly positive. He's been faithful to God and he's served the people well. Now, he gives the people the opportunity to evaluate his leadership. In particular, he gives them the opportunity to bring any accusation of wrongdoing against him.

Notice the contrast that's being drawn. Back in chapter 8, when Samuel warned them about getting a king like the other nations, he says this:

- The king will take your sons.
- The king will take your daughters.
- The king will take the best of your fields.
- The king will take taxes of your produce.
- The king will take your servants and your animals.

He warned them that a king like the nations will take and take and take. They'll feel burdened by his demands.

Now Samuel asks them to testify about himself.

- Has he taken someone's ox?
- Has he taken someone's donkey?
- Has he taken anyone's money through cheating?
- Has he taken through oppression?
- Has he taken bribes?

It's the same theme again – the same warning. Think about the sort of leadership you've had – has it been a *taking* sort of leadership or a *servicing* sort of leadership. Think of a king like the nations – those sorts of kings are characterised by taking.

At the same time, Samuel's preparing the way for what he's about to say. He's about to issue a serious challenge to the people. If they have something against Samuel – if there's something that undermines Samuel's integrity or character in some way – then the challenge that comes will lose a significant amount of its force as well. It'd be a bit like Christopher Skase (if he was still around) haranguing a group of businessmen on the evils of greed or Bill Clinton telling off America for being unfaithful to their spouses. Samuel's character is a significant part of the message he's got to get across.

The people affirm that Samuel's been above board in his dealings with them. Samuel gets them to do it again – he affirms the seriousness of what they're doing. This time he emphasises they're doing it before God and before the new leader, the king. It all has the feel of legal proceedings about it. This is a solemn declaration under oath that Samuel hasn't been diddling anyone.

Israel's History

Having got that out of the way, Samuel gets down to the real business at hand – the future of the people and the

future of the king. He looks at the potential of the fresh start – but he doesn't begin with the nice new exercise books, he begins with the dirty, messy, scraggy, battered books from last year. He reminds them of their history. Verse 6:

Then Samuel said to the people, "It is the LORD who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your forefathers up out of Egypt. Now then, stand here, because I am going to confront you with evidence before the LORD as to all the righteous acts performed by the LORD for you and your fathers.

"After Jacob entered Egypt, they cried to the LORD for help, and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your forefathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place.

"But they forgot the LORD their God; so He sold them into the hand of Sisera, the commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hands of the Philistines and the king of Moab, who fought against them. They cried out to the LORD and said, 'We have sinned; we have forsaken the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths. But now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve You.' Then the LORD sent Jerub-Baal, Barak, Jephthah and Samuel, and he delivered you from the hands of your enemies on every side, so that you lived securely."

Unfortunately for Israel, Samuel hadn't been to the modern schools of positive thinking and future potential affirmation. He's not simply into telling Israel what a great king God's provided for them and how he's head and shoulders above the rest and what a great future he'll provide for the nation. This isn't a quick motivational talk to get them through the next twelve months. Samuel

has more important goals in mind.

Samuel wants them to learn some very important lessons from their history. He hopes they'll learn them so they won't repeat them now they've entered the new grade. Three things for them to note.

First, God's the One who has the real power and who is the real king. This is a lesson that's come through in the previous chapters. In terms of political systems, God can work with all sorts of different systems. Indeed, God's quite able to look after both Himself and Israel when the political system's in a shambles. That was the lesson when God sent His ark into exile down amongst the Philistines. He has the real power. He didn't actually need any help from Israel or any advice from them as to what was the best leadership system for the era they lived in. So it was also in chapter 7 when God scattered the Philistines with a significant display of thunder.

And God's exercised His kingship for them in the past. He's acted righteously on their behalf – He's done the right thing by them and He's kept His promises to their fathers. He delivered them from oppression in Egypt. He's given them the land. They can't complain that God's failed in His kingship – or that there's something lacking in God's power.

Secondly, they have a history of wandering away from God. Even before they got to Mt Sinai, they grumbled and complained that God wasn't looking after their needs sufficiently. While they were at Mt Sinai getting God's words, they made the golden calf. They refused to enter the land of Canaan when God told them. When they did

eventually enter the land – after the previous generation's bones were scattered all over the Sinai Peninsula – they kept ignoring the real God and involving themselves in idolatry. Time and again through the Judges period, God sends their enemies against them to teach them the futility of turning aside to idols. Time and again they turn back to God. Time and again that turning back to God doesn't last and they go back to their futile idolatry. That may not have been a pleasant experience for them – but it too was part of God dealing with them righteously and mercifully.

Thirdly, God's able to provide leaders when need be and God's able to rescue them from the results of their own wickedness. God had provided Moses and Joshua. God had provided each of the judges – Ehud, Barak and Deborah, Gideon, Samson. They proved sufficient for the situation – not because of any particular inherent ability in themselves, but because God acted through them. With some of them, it's because God acted even in spite of them.

Israel's Future

Which of the three lessons is most important for Israel this day? All three are important – and all three feature in what Samuel goes on to say. He begins, however, with the second one – their tendency to rebel. Verse 12:

But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, "No, we want a king to rule over us"—even though the LORD your God was your king.

He keeps harping on this theme like a broken record. We've seen it time and again in the last few chapters. Israel's request for a king was rebellion against God.

They weren't satisfied with the way God ruled them – they wanted to modernise. They wanted their own way. They wanted to call the shots. They felt they'd be more secure with a human king than they were with God as King. It was sheer stupidity when you think about it. More than that, it was sin through and through. It was wicked at its heart. They'd been told again and again. The problem was, there'd been no evidence of acknowledgment of the sin by the people. There'd been no evidence of repentance for their rebellion.

And so Samuel moves to the third lesson – the lesson that God is quite capable of providing leaders for them. Verse 13:

Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the LORD has set a king over you. 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! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against His commands, His hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers.

They asked for a king. God's given them a king. Yet, a king in himself will not solve their problems – because the problem's back in lesson 2. Any king they choose faces the same choice they themselves face.

- They can obey God and keep His commands; or
- They can disobey God and ignore His commands.

If the king and people choose to obey God all will be well and good. If the king and people choose to disobey God, then there'll be trouble.

The reality is that nothing's really changed. It was just like that under the previous leadership systems. Even the

great leader Moses couldn't stop Israel's constant grumbling and rebellion in the Sinai peninsula. Certainly, a good leader can provide good direction. He can provide good leadership. But he can't force people to willingly obey God. He can't change the nature of people's hearts.

That hasn't changed as far as human leaders go. I can preach God's word to you. I can do it as faithfully as I know how. I can challenge you to trust God's word. But I can't make you. I can't force you to give up your elements of unbelief. I can't change your hearts. I can't even do that for myself. There's only one leader who can do that – Jesus. It's a matter of trusting God as King. That's why we pray and ask Him to do that for us.

And so Samuel comes back to the first lesson. Verse 16:

"Now then, stand still and see this great thing the LORD is about to do before your eyes! Is it not wheat harvest now? I will call upon the LORD to send thunder and rain. And you will realise what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the LORD when you asked for a king."

Then Samuel called upon the LORD, and that same day the LORD sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel. The people all said to Samuel, "Pray to the LORD your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king."

So what, some people ask. What's a little bit of thunder and rain? So Samuel managed to fluke a weather forecast. Why does that impress these poor people so much? Are they perhaps a little gullible? A little simple?

It's at this point that we need to understand the local conditions – and therefore we need to go to the commentaries for help. The wheat harvest happened around May or June each year. That was the dry season. Rain was virtually unknown. Thunder was very unexpected. You and I in our comfortable city living may not pay much attention to the weather patterns – but these farmers did. They knew when the rains came each year. Their survival depended on it. God's sign in response to Samuel's prayer was very impressive to them.

It was also a little scary – not the sort of scary that a child may feel when there are a few rumbles of thunder around the night sky, but the sort of scary that a farmer may feel when his crop's about ready to harvest and it's damaged or wiped out by a freak storm. Even more than that, there could be a touch of fear that this is only the beginning. God seems to be cheesed off with their demand for a king – maybe He'll follow up the thunder with a plague of locusts or an earthquake.

It's at this point that their sin begins to hit home to them – when there's something of a threat to the hip-pocket. It's recorded there for us in verse 19. What sort of reaction is this? Is it genuine repentance? Is it only a sorrow that they've been found out and a means to avoid further judgment? Only God knows the answer to that – although the way they act in the future will give a fairly good pointer to it.

Samuel, however, moves to reassure them. Verse 20:

"Do not be afraid," Samuel replied. "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but

serve the LORD with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of His great name the LORD will not reject His people, because the LORD was pleased to make you His own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the LORD and serve Him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things He has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away."

In reassuring them, Samuel reminds them of the way forward. Yes, their demand for a king was rebellion against God. That was wicked. That was evil. It needs to be recognised as such. God was not pleased with them about that. They need to know that what they did was serious – very serious.

Yet, that sin is not the final word. God isn't about to wipe them out. God hasn't given up on them. God has a sovereign purpose for them. God acts because of His great name. Yes, they're responsible for their great wickedness – but their wickedness won't stop God's plans. It was God's sovereign choice that chose them. It's God's sovereign choice that continues to work in their history.

God's given them a king. Saul's standing there with them – although you'll notice he's done nothing other than be a witness in the entire chapter. And it's possible for both king and people to move forward in accordance with God's will. Their sin hasn't forever blocked God's plans for them. God's grace provides a fresh start for the

people. Yet, it's up to them what they do with those new exercise books.

- They can do the same as they did in the previous grade. They can chase after a few idols. They can follow the practices of the nations round them. They can ignore God's instructions and God's prophet.
- Or they can remodel themselves. They can get rid of the useless idols for good. They can provide examples of godly lives for the nations round about them. They can stop using God's instructions as a paper-weight and get serious about conforming their lives to them.

That's the question that's there for the reader as they turn to chapter 13. Will their exercise books look neat and tidy – will they change their ways? Or will they mess up their fresh start? Will they continue to rebel against God and end up with filthy exercise books?

Israel's Past

From our standpoint in history, we know the outcome. They bombed out badly again. They looked for security elsewhere. Saul did not follow God's instructions and was rejected. David's sin resulted in the country having a civil war. Solomon's reign imposed a heavy burden on the people – so much so that after he died the nation split into two. The northern part was called Israel – her kings led her into idolatry and God brought the Assyrians against her and sent her into exile. The southern part was called Judah – they lasted about 150 years longer before God used the Babylonians to take them off into exile as well. They messed up their exercise books rather badly.

From our standpoint in theological understanding, we

also know why they bombed out. The problem wasn't that they needed new exercise books – the problem was they needed new hearts. The fresh start didn't help them because it didn't change the inclination of their hearts. They were still hearts with a self-centred bias. They were still hearts with a bias against God.

Yet, after many failed attempts and many failed kings, God does send a King who does something about human hearts. When we turn to the pages of the New Testament we find Jesus – a King who doesn't take and take and take, but a King who gives of Himself. He came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life for others. It's in that action – the action of giving His life – that He opens up for all of us the possibility of a fresh start.

The opportunity that's there for us is greater than Israel. The new beginning we're offered in Jesus is greater than the new beginning they're offered in Saul. Yet, the conditions of acceptance remain basically the same.

- Recognise your sin. Acknowledge your rebellion.
- Repent. Turn away from that sin.
- Give up your useless idols – whatever they may be.
- Follow God – find your security in Him.

The big difference is that, in Jesus, God offers to give you a new heart – a heart that's willing to submit to Him.

Is that submission a one-off thing? No – it's an ongoing thing. Moment by moment, as I walk through life, I'm called on to reaffirm my submission to Jesus as King.

Is that submission an easy thing? It should be. After all, we're talking about God here. What could be more sensible than to submit to the God who both created and sus-

tains the universe? Who can provide greater security than Him? Yet, the reality is we are tempted to look elsewhere – to the things those around us look to for their security: wealth, power, popularity. We are tempted to follow the solutions of the politicians and entrepreneurs – to rely on them rather than God.

Samuel calls on us to acknowledge that as foolish wickedness. God guarantees our security forever. He's done it by the death of His Son. He doesn't say we won't face difficulties on the way. Indeed, He promises there will be significant difficulties for the godly as they live in a godless world. He also promises those difficulties can't separate us from His love. He promises He'll use those difficulties to achieve His good purposes in our lives. Why would we want to replace that security with something that's merely human?