

Lessons From a Courtroom

1 Samuel 12

“Only fear the LORD and serve Him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things He has done for you.”

Introduction: Courtrooms are the location of exceptional dramas. It is the place where cases are built, witnesses called, evidence given, juries are convinced, innocence is fought for, guilt is proven, and justice is gained. Some of the best stories and movies have taken place in the courtroom, whether its *12 Angry Men*, the 1957 movie from the perspective of 12 jurors deliberating over a murder trial, to the famous “You can’t handle the truth” scene between Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise in “*A Few Good Men*”, to the critically acclaimed “*To Kill a Mockingbird*”, which dealt with racism in the deep south in 1962. Courtrooms provide a place where truth can be proclaimed and vetted.

Courtrooms provide an impartial setting for conducting legal proceedings, where individuals can find justice, ensuring the people of a particular nation that they can get a fair trial. The focal person in the courtroom is the judge, who is seated centrally and higher than anyone else, and navigates the dissenting parties presenting disparate facts. In all of it, the courtroom functions as a guardian and interpreter of the Law (or in our case, *Constitution*). The hope is that the truth is upheld, confessions are made, and the rights of people are upheld.

As we come to **1 Samuel 12** we are lead into a courtroom drama, one where Israel as a nation is ushered in to give an account of their past actions and present predicament, where witnesses and evidence are presented to leave no doubt as to guilt. But something amazing happens in this drama. The courtroom, which is a scary, intimidating, and fearful place (especially if you are guilty) turns into a place of **grace**, where the judge offers not a pardon, but payment, not leniency, but restoration. If Israel would simply throw themselves onto the **mercy** of the judge, they would find it! All of this points to our own plight and opportunity, as God the judge AND gracious One who saves calls everyone to fear Him and serve Him faithfully with all their heart, knowing the great things He has done for us!

A Case is Built (12:1-15)

*“Here I am; **testify against me before the LORD** and before 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? **Testify against me and I will restore it** to you. 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**’. And Samuel said to the people, “**The LORD is witness.**” (vv. 3-6a)*

We left Israel last week at a celebration at Gilgal, the place where they had memorialized the greatness of God in coming out of the Wilderness into the Promised Land (Joshua 4), a celebration filled with sacrifice, coronation, and joy. It was here that Samuel led the people to “renew the kingdom”, to rededicate themselves to the Lord with renewed vigor and truth. In doing so, Samuel actually led the nation into a **virtual courtroom**. **NOTE** in the text the three “*now’s*” in verse 2, 7, and 13. These three are the points of Samuel the litigation lawyer, as he puts himself on the witness stand first (2-6), then

brings evidence and witnesses against Israel itself (7-12), before offering an alternative (13-15). Like any good trial lawyer, Samuel builds the **narrative for the jury, telling the whole story in a compelling way that leaves NO DOUBT as to the expected outcome.**

- **Samuel puts himself on the witness stand** – Every leader hopes that at the end of their life or assignment that they could look back and not only know they did all they could, but could be affirmed by those they sought to serve. At first glance, it seemed as if Samuel was trying to **justify himself as a leader.** He recognized that his time as leader was done since he was old and his sons were with them, but then asks the nation to **testify against him** if he had NOT operated in godly character, integrity, and honesty. Its striking that since so many leaders abuse their power and authority, the ones who do not truly stand out. He cited that he never stole, defrauded, oppressed, or taken anything from them. In other words, he **truly served them**, and was not in it to GAIN but to GIVE – a true servant leader.

But there was more than just self-justification at the heart of Samuel's time on the witness stand. When he asked the people to testify against him, and they **affirmed that he had operated well among them**, Samuel made sure that they knew they were a witness against themselves, and even the **LORD was witness.** In other words, he left no wiggle room for the people to **shift the blame to leadership as to their shortcomings that would be pointed out next** – when he gave them a king, he did so according to their own request and desires – NOT because they lacked in a human leader. Now he will turn the spotlight on THEM, and accuses them of falling short

- **Samuel turns from defendant to prosecutor** – As Israel shifts over, Samuel calls God Himself to the witness stand ("the LORD is witness"). He cited **three eras** of Israel's history where God showed His power and character as deliverer: 1) When He appointed Moses and Aaron to bring the people out of slavery in **Egypt**; 2) the time of the Judges, where God delivered Israel from the hand of Sisera, the Philistines, and the Moabites through Jurbbaal (or Gideon – Judges 6:32), Barak, and Jephthah and Samuel; and 3) most recently, delivering them from the hand of Nahash (which they JUST experienced). *What was the point that Samuel was making?*

When God delivered them from Egypt through mighty and righteous deeds, the people **forgot the LORD their God** (9), and were thus oppressed. So when they said "*we have sinned and have forsaken God...deliver us from our enemy so we can serve you*" (10), God did! See a pattern?!?? And NOW, as God delivered them from Nahash and the Ammonites, they had the audacity to say "**No, but a king shall reign over us', WHEN THE LORD YOUR GOD WAS YOUR KING!**" It is the same unbelief, the same pattern of forgetting God and chasing after idols that summarized their history. It revealed the pattern of history: 1) Crisis 2) Cry for help 3) Deliverance by God 4) Return to their vomit. Now before we start shaking our head at Israel for this, it's important to remember we **struggle with the same thing**, each time we distrust the LORD and turn faithlessly to our sin. We can easily:

1. **Become prisoners of the moment** – Most momentary crisis seems like the worst, regardless if its severity is as bad as the past. We quietly think, "*In **THIS** He cannot provide, He has no provision for me in **THIS!***" This type of thinking about the greatness and sovereignty of God are very **silent, private, subtle, low key ----- and FAITHLESS** (Rom. 14:23b – *'for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin'*)

2. **Have a dose of spiritual amnesia** – We quickly **FORGET** the greatness and work of God in the past! This is why Samuel called Israel to review its past, why the Psalms review the work of God in creation and life, and why we make sure we have our minds centered on God's Word – forgetfulness leads to a lack of faith in the future grace of God and His ongoing provision in the present.
3. **Exhibit what Jesus called out in the disciples** – When the disciples were beginning to be anxious over the basics of life, like what they would eat or wear, He not only told them not to be anxious, but pointed out it was an issue of **faith** ('O you of little faith' – Matt. 6:30; 16:8), or when they faced new and scary circumstances like a storm and drowning, he called out the same thing (Matt. 8:26; 14:31), or even in the dramatic like casting out a demon (Matt. 17:20).

The main issue for all people for all time is whether we will **trust the LORD in everything**, that He is the source of strength, sustenance, and satisfaction, or whether we will look elsewhere, and there is no middle ground. This was the absolute point Samuel was making, and before issuing a verdict, he provided an **alternative**:

- **Alternative for Israel given** – God is gracious by nature and character, and His grace is magnified when it's lavished on those who clearly do not deserve it. **"Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more"** (Rom. 5:20). He gave **two conditional phrases** that illustrate the two different paths each person is on. **First**, IF the nation and king would fear, serve, and obey the LORD, ceasing their rebel ways and follow the LORD alone, **it will be well**. This is clear, gracious, and absolute. **BUT, SECOND**, IF they continue in their rebellion and disobedience, God's hand will be **AGAINST THEM**. Clear, concise, and just. We remember this important reality: God is a loving, kind, patient, and gracious God, who is **ALSO** equally wrathful and just – both **severe and kind** (Romans 11:22). Listen to what **Romans 2:4-8** says:

*"Or do you presume on the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is **meant to lead you to repentance**. But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up **wrath for yourself on the day of wrath** when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are **self-seeking, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury**".*

Evidence is Presented (12:16-18)

*"Now therefore, stand still and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes...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.**" (vv. 16, 19)*

Salvation and deliverance of sin is not some cuddly and sanitized experience, since it came at the cost of God pouring out His wrath on His Son on the cross, so that He did not have to pour it out on us when we trust Jesus by faith. But this can only happen when we come to grips with our own sin and where that leaves us with a holy, wrathful, and just God. So to drive home his point with Israel, Samuel called for evidence in the form of a **demonstration of God's power**, which is always powerful in a courtroom (like "the glove doesn't fit!?!?!")

To show Israel the greatness of their wickedness (17) God gave a remarkable demonstration. It was the harvest season, which signals the beginning of the dry season, most likely in **May/June**. **Thunder and rain** at this point would have been RARE, with most never experiencing it in their lifetime, much like a HURRICANE in August in Southern California! What did this signify?

- 1) Showed Israel by demonstration what power God held and how easily and quickly He could change their circumstances. In terms of harvest, farmers are ultimately dependent on rain at certain times during the year, and a bad rain at harvest time could wreck an entire crop.
- 2) Samuel laid on the evidence thick to elicit a **fearful response**. The problem was NOT that the people had a proper view of God, but that they had an IMPROPER ONE, like many of us today who deal with subtle idolatry, trusting ourselves and walking by sight. We must remember that God is to be **FEARED**, since He holds the entire world like a drop in His hand and can bring death and calamity as quickly as He brings life and pleasure. Samuel did not let the people quickly move on like in chapter 11 when they pivoted to hailing their king. He took up every possible excuse so that as they sat in the courtroom, with all the evidence laid out, the only reasonable thing to do was confess. And that is exactly what happened.

Confession is Made (12:19)

*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 as king.**"*

Finally, the people broke. It was like reading the drama or watching the movie where the audience KNOWS the defendant is guilty, but they have maintained their innocence throughout the entire drama, only to have a dramatic confession ('ok, I did it...it was me!'). There are some important components to their confession:

- 1) **They saw their own actions as sinful and evil, making no excuses** – After avoiding this reality and doubling down on their request for a king, the people finally saw their sin for what it was: an affront to a holy, glorious God. God demands perfection and obedience, and will not compete or share His glory with another. No longer were they comparing themselves to other nations. No longer were they comfortable in their rebellion. No longer were they trying to act like everything was ok. In light of the fearful knowledge of God, they acknowledged their vast sin AND faithless request. This is the step that is so necessary and missed when people contemplate their eternal state or relationship with the God of the universe. Whenever someone refuses to acknowledge their own **sinfulness and sin**. To truly get to a point of true salvation, a person MUST see their personal offense before a holy God, without excuse, blame shift, or caveat.
- 2) **They knew that their sin deserved death** – What is the telltale sign of acknowledging our sinfulness? We know what we truly deserve. In light of the fearful wrath of God, Israel understood that death was both imminent AND without argument. **"The wages of sin IS death"** (Rom. 6:23). When we know we deserve death, we stop trying to self-justify or point to our own work or value and simply lay ourselves bare before the LORD, seeking His mercy.
- 3) **They had hope of deliverance in spite of their guilt** – They sought the intercession of Samuel, a go-between on their behalf, knowing that they had nothing to offer God in themselves. This is

exactly who Jesus is and what He did. He offered Himself in our place to bear the wrath of God so that God would treat Jesus like HE should have treated us, exhausting the punishment for our sin on Christ! By faith we trust in that sacrifice, can seek forgiveness, and receive His righteousness given to us, allowing us to be restored and reconciled to God. This is what was hoped for by Israel in the intercessory prayer of Samuel.

Unexpected Verdict Given (12:20-25)

*“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...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.”** (20-21; 24-25)*

Those that truly have tasted the goodness of God in the gospel NEVER get tired of hearing and celebrating the grace of God. The scene is as bleak and tense, as the defendant CONFESSES their guilt, and now the prosecutor reads the verdict from the Judge, expecting what they deserve, when something incredible happens: assurances are given that the defendant will not only NOT die, but will REMAIN in relationship with the Judge Himself. This IS GRACE, and GRACE ALONE. Here is what we see about God’s grace:

- 1) **God’s grace embraces ALL of sin and wickedness** – God did not lessen the offense or its egregious nature (“don’t worry about it...it was only an offensive request for a king”). No, God sees, knows and has been offended by each and every sin we’ve ever committed, and STILL extends His grace to us, reminding us that our fear of Him can draw us TO Him, not chase us away.
- 2) **Grace acknowledges sin but does NOT look backward** – God did not call Israel to look back and wallow in their guilt or try to get them to relive their tragic mistake. He did not rewind what they did over and over as if somehow making them feel miserable would somehow **atone for their sin**. This is an imperative reminder when we seek to forgive each other. Grace knows that atonement is made by Someone outside of the one who sinned against us, and allows us to move forward rather than continuing to punish.
- 3) **Grace is based on God’s fidelity and faithfulness, not ours** – Notice that though Israel broke faith with God, He would not break from them because of His commitment to His great name and His own people. When God chose to love us and call us and begin a good work in us, HE WILL BE FAITHFUL TO COMPLETE IT (Phil. 1:6)
- 4) **Grace does not reverse all the reversible consequences of sin** – Israel acknowledged their sinful choice of a king, but they were stuck with him. God did not simply undo Saul’s kingship, reversing time. The people would still have to bear up under Saul’s leadership failures and all its implications, but they could still move forward and it “could be well” (v. 14)
- 5) **Grace is greater than our sin, and calls us to total fidelity** – What God offers us in salvation is a new heart, becoming a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Not only this, but offers us lavished grace

which helps us overcome our fleshly desires (Rom. 5:20b). Because He gives us these resources, He demands full commitment, meaning obedience and trust with our full heart (12:20, 24). We cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:24) because one will always take precedence. We are saved by grace alone, but grace never stays alone.

- 6) **Grace does not mean there is no judgement** – The stark reality at the end of this courtroom drama is the fact that ***“if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.”*** God’s grace is NOT in opposition with His justice and judgment. There are only two paths that every person living or who has ever lived find themselves on: a narrow path that leads to life that few find, and a wide one that leads to destruction that is heavily populated (Matt. 7:13-14). The only real question is what path are you on – and neglecting to answer gives a clear answer.

Why did God bring Israel into the courtroom? Because He is GRACIOUS! If He were not, He would be justified to simply judge and cast Israel away....and in our case, would simply see our sin and punish us to death. But He provides witness and evidence to us of our own sin and His faithfulness, with the hope that we’ll be *stripped of the camouflage of pure rebellion that most hold against God*. It is a gracious thing to be confronted with our sin so we can believe the atoning work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. For those that DO believe that and are on the narrow path, we remember that our idolatry can be **subtle and our lack of faith low key**, but it’s all offensive to Him. So the question is: does He have our **whole heart, or are there things we must acknowledge, confess, sorrow over, hate, be ashamed of, and turn from to truly fear the Lord and have a joyful relationship with Him**. That is the lesson from the courtroom. That is the beauty of His grace lavished on us.