

Fear God, Your King

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Date: 04 November 2007

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[0 : 00] Well, let's pray. God, you've caused all Holy Scripture to be written to make us wise for salvation in Christ, to teach us and correct us, to reprove us and train us in righteousness and make us equipped for every good work.

So we pray that your purpose for Holy Scripture will be effected in our lives tonight so that you may be glorified and honoured in us and through us.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, the Prime Minister has been advocating compulsory history up to, I think, Year 10.

And his citizenship test that's just been introduced also has a key focus on learning Australian history. I think one of the heroes of the Prime Minister was Winston Churchill, the wartime British Prime Minister, who once said, study history, study history, study history.

I think he had a stutter, but he did say it three times in a row. Now, to be honest, I'm all for learning history. I actually love history, and this is something that I think I would like to support the Prime Minister on.

[1 : 14] It may not be many things, but that's one. When I studied history at school, I used to know at one point all the kings and queens of England and the dates of their coming to power and dying for the last 1,100 years.

And, well, that's one of the things he did, you know, when he got bored, I suppose. I've always liked history. I've always liked dates. I can tell you which day of the year the Battle of Trafalgar was on, the Bastille Day, the Battle of Hastings, I think was the 21st of October, and things like that. And I used to, in fact, keep a diary of famous events and things that happened on that day. So each day I could tell you that this person was born this day or this battle was fought this day or whatever it is.

A lot of that I've forgotten. But do take note. Next month is the, what is it, the 200th anniversary of the death of John Newton, the great Christian pastor and hymn writer, about a week before Christmas.

And about the same time, I think, is the 250th anniversary of the death of Charles Wesley. So there'll be lots of hymn singing done that week before Christmas, maybe not Christmas carols. But anyway, I studied history all the way through school, including at VCE.

[2 : 24] So I'm quite a history fan, and I think it's pretty good that John Howard thinks that we should study history. One of the things, though, that I loved about history in my earlier years was all the dates and names and things.

And I've got quite a memory for that sort of thing, so I used to, you know, like that sort of stuff. But it's only when I was in year 10 and year 11 that I began to realise that history was not actually simply the recollection of dates and facts and names and events.

But rather I gradually came to realise in years 10 and 11 studying history that it's full of competing ideas and competing viewpoints and worldviews and opinions.

And so, for example, when I learnt British history as a youngster at school, in primary school, Charles I was a hero. Now, he was beheaded by the Republicans in 1649, at the end of January that year, in Whitehall.

Sorry, I'm getting digressing. But he was the hero. And the Oliver Cromwells and the Roundheads and Republicans, they were the baddies. But it's only as I became a late teenager and into an adult you began to realise, well, actually there are different viewpoints on this about who was actually good and who was bad.

[3 : 40] It's the same with the problem of a divided island. When I studied history in primary school and early secondary school, Ireland should have been part of England, is sort of how it was

portrayed.

But then you gradually come to realise all the problems of Ireland going back even to Oliver Cromwell's day and maybe there's different points of view. Was the Boston Tea Party a happy party or a sad party?

Depends whose point of view. Was the War of Independence of the Americans in 1776 a good thing that they won or a bad thing that England lost? There's all sorts of different viewpoints and competing ideas.

Certainly when I studied history, the British Empire seemed always to be right. The more I've read history as an adult, the more it seems to me that the British Empire was almost always wrong. Well, often.

Well, there's some contentious viewpoints. My point is, history is worth studying and important to study, not just for the recollection of events and dates and names, but because of the issues that we're meant to actually learn from and understand from.

[4 : 42] The trouble is, so rarely do we do it. Aldous Huxley, a famous atheist writer, last century, said that that men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach.

That is, we keep failing to learn from history. And that is the key lesson in this chapter tonight. It's actually a history lesson.

It's urging us to know our history and to learn from our history. Well, the context of 1 Samuel chapter 12 is that Israel is basking in the triumph and glory of victory over the Ammonites, which we saw last week.

Nahash, the king of the Ammonites, who come from what is modern-day Jordan, the capital of which today is Amman, from the same word, the Ammonites. Nahash had been threatening and defeating many of the Israelite towns across the Jordan in what is modern-day kingdom of Jordan. And he'd come to the significant town of Jabesh-Gilead and last week we saw that he failed to defeat Jabesh-Gilead, but rather there the Israelites won a victory.

[6 : 00] But up till that time he had been a menace and defeating, it seems, many of the Israelites on that side of the Jordan River. Moreover, we saw last week that in the defeat of Nahash, king of the Ammonites, King Saul of Israel, on debut, mind you, wins a great victory, his first act as king.

He'd gone off back to his farm after being made king and then on debut won a great victory, great triumph over Nahash and all the Ammonites. So the nation is secure, the menace across the Jordan has been defeated, long live the king.

Israel is basking in the glory a victory. Samuel offers a more sober commentary on the events and the events leading up to that victory in this chapter.

Samuel is the prophet and the one who's been leading Israel as its prophet slash judge up until the handover in effect to their first king, King Saul. The chapter begins with Samuel reflecting in a sense.

He's old, grey, like some of us who are young are grey and he says, I've listened to you in all that you've said to me and I've set a king over you. Refers back to chapter 8 which we saw a few weeks ago where the people ask for a king and Samuel under God's prompting has allowed them and set up a king, Saul, to be king over them.

[7 : 28] See, he says in verse 2, it is the king who leads you now. I am old and grey but my sons are with you. I have led you from my youth until this day. Notice how he says the king who leads you now and I have led you.

Literally walk before is the verb but it's a transition. I have walked before you. Now it is Saul the king who walks before you or who leads you.

Samuel then goes on to say here I am testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. That is another way of saying the king because kings are anointed.

Literally the Messiah. Whose ox have I taken or whose donkey have I taken of whom have I defrauded 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. Samuel is declaring his innocence. He has acted rightly, wisely as a judge. The point of him saying this is partly because of the transition over to Saul and Samuel in a sense is winding down as their leader but also he's underscoring the fact that his innocence and integrity as a leader is in contrast to what he said kings will do.

[8 : 50] If you remember back to chapter 8 the king the king will take your sons and take your daughters and take your animals and take your tithes but also it's to make a contrast between Samuel's integrity but the failure of the people of Israel as a whole as we'll see in the verses that follow.

Well the people respond and say you've not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from the hand of anyone. Well 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. They agree Samuel's integrity is beyond dispute. Samuel is not to blame. Now people sometimes say that history just repeats itself or that it's circular or cyclical that is history just goes round in endless circles.

In the big picture of history that's untrue. The Bible's view of history is that we are heading towards a clear destiny that God has made this world for a purpose to which he is bringing it one day. The Bible shows us that. However within that big picture it's fair to say that there are circles or spirals or repeats or cycles from time to time.

[10 : 14] Not because history ultimately is endless or pointless but rather because people do not learn from history. And so when another situation evolves the same mistakes are made and there are circles or cycles within the long progression of history.

That's actually also what we find in the Bible and what we find being taught here in this chapter 1 Samuel 12. The basic sequence or cycle or history repeating itself that this chapter demonstrates is a three point cycle.

Crisis cry and deliverance. They don't all begin with kerr. A crisis evolves the people of Israel cry out to God and there is deliverance.

That's the history lesson that Samuel is about to teach. But he's not just teaching it as a sequence of events and dates and facts and so on but to show that Israel has not learned from history as it should.

So the first cycle in effect that he mentions is in verse 8. Samuel now moves on from declaring his innocence and in verse 6 onwards begins to give them a history lesson.

[11 : 34] Well let's pick it up in verse 8 and Samuel says when Jacob that is one of the ancestors of Israel went into Egypt and the Egyptians oppressed them Jacob was also named for Israel a nation then your ancestors cried to the Lord.

Now those events summarize Exodus chapters 1 and 2 the second book of the Bible long time before this book 1 Samuel. Crisis is oppression by the Egyptians the cry at the end of Exodus 2 mentioned here your ancestors cried to the Lord and the deliverance the Lord sent Moses and Aaron who brought forth your ancestors out of Egypt and settled them in this place.

Well literally Joshua settled them but it's summarizing quite a few books of the Bible and quite a period of history. Crisis cry deliverance. Those three things are the pattern of the book of Judges which is the book preceding 1 Samuel and in the book of Judges we actually get at least half a dozen of those cycles.

A crisis against Israel crying out to God and deliverance. Here it's all summarized in verses 9 to 11. They forgot the Lord their God that is after settling in the land and he sold them into the hand of Sisera commander of the army of King Jabin of Hutzor that's mentioned in Judges 4 and 5 and into the hand of the Philistines that's later in Judges in the time of Samson into the hand of Moab as well that's in the time of a judge called Eglon and they fought against them not all at once it's referring it's sort of condensing the book of Judges into one little thing here then they cried to the Lord so the crisis in verse 9 leads to the cry of verse 10 and they said we have sinned because we have forsaken the Lord and have served the Baals and the Astartes that's the male and female Canaanite gods idolatry but now this is their cry to God rescue us out of the hand of our enemies and we will serve you and then verse 11 the deliverance the Lord sent

Jeroboam which is another name for Gideon Judges chapter 6 Barak maybe referring back to the book of Numbers Jephthah one of the judges in the book of Judges and Samson the last of the judges in the book of Judges and rescued you out of the hand of your enemies on every side and you lived in safety well there's the there's the history repeating itself crisis cry deliverance in Exodus and several times in the book of Judges now the key history lesson here is who delivers or who saves and if you were here last week and have paid attention to last week hopefully you'll remember the answer to that you'll probably guess anyway it's God who saves so in verse 8 notice that it is the Lord who sent Moses and Aaron in verse 11 it's the Lord who sent Jeroboam Jephthah

Samson Barak and so on that is

[14 : 45] God saves through human deliverers but it is God who saves it is God who delivers well now in 1 Samuel we have another crisis the immediately preceding one what we saw last week in effect and that is the threat of the Ammonites under Nahash their king so in verse 12 but when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you you said to me no but a king shall reign over us though the Lord your God was your king in fact see here is the king whom you've chosen for whom you've asked see the Lord has set a king over you referring to King Saul the crisis is Nahash king of the Ammonites demolishing some of the cities across the Jordan and threatening Jabesh Gilead one of the key cities as we saw last week now if Israel had learned from history what ought to do two things from the lesson that had been taught in the verses preceding one is cry out to God for deliverance that's what Israel did in Exodus 2 and God delivered them through

Moses and Aaron that's what Israel did in the book of Judges and God delivered them by various judges through that book so the first thing is to cry out to God the second thing would be to acknowledge their sin that's picked up in verses 9 to 11 in the judges story each time they drift away into sins of idolatry and in crying out to God they confess their sin and repent and turn from it but what did Israel do with the threat of Nahash no acknowledgement of sin and no crying out to God for God to deliver but rather a demand of God to give us a human king you see how they've not learned from history they haven't seen that God is their deliverer that they should cry to him for salvation instead they've demanded of God we want a king like the nations that's been their demand they have failed to call to God the deliverer and rather place their hope and trust in a human deliverer which is folly in the end

Israel has failed to learn the lesson of history and just in case the people might now say well it wasn't our fault it's your fault Samuel Samuel's integrity has been agreed to by the people already Samuel is above reproach he's acted rightly as their leader so the people can't simply say Samuel it's actually your fault rather it's their fault that their nation has been under threat and that they failed to cry out to God someone once said that history is like a great big early warning system certainly biblical history is like that let's not make the same mistake as Israel you see the Bible is like an early warning system to make us to warn us when crises arrive how we are to respond how to heed the warnings that's what the Bible's history is meant to function as in many respects as an early warning warning system for us now our crisis is probably unlikely to be the

Ammonites on our doorstep but there are various crises that face us and the Bible is teaching us here how to respond to crises drought failure in exams marriage breakdowns griefs stresses job losses injustices how do we respond to crises well one of the things ought to be to search for our personal sin that maybe we need to confess and repent of and secondly to cry out to God for deliverance now maybe I've slightly broadened the crises a bit too much in saying that not all of those crises I mentioned have got personal enemies against us but nonetheless it seems to me that the Bible is setting a pattern here from which we are to learn and yet so often our response in some crisis is not actually to learn and cry out to

God but rather to whinge and grumble and complain and turn away in unbelief to think that God doesn't actually want to care for us that somehow our discomfort or crisis shows somehow that God's not powerful or not loving too often we don't even bring God into the consideration it's one of the astonishing things about the severity of the drought in our country in the last few years is how little the church leadership has actually called the nation to not pray only but to actually repent of our sins too often I think we act like ancient Israel well Samuel continues with the history lesson in verse 14 and 15 if you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God it will be well but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord but rebel against the commandment of the Lord then the hand of the

[20 : 20] Lord will be against you and your king now let me tell you that is still history lesson we could read it as simply the lesson from history and Samuel saying okay now this is the lesson follow God and it will be well and if you don't follow God it won't but it's still a history lesson because that language comes out of their history the language of verses 14 and 15 puts in a nutshell Deuteronomy 28 for example the covenant curses and blessings in effect if you obey then God will bring blessing but if you don't he will not and in a sense some Samuel has summarized the covenant response in those two verses in language that they ought to recognize and identify from their history what Samuel you see is actually pointing to or implying here is that the threat of

Nahash and his his mopping up job of a few Israelite cities before his defeat at

Jabesh Gilead shows a threat to the land promised by God how should Israel interpret a threat to the land and some defeat of their territory it is part of the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28 it is because Israel is singing against God and rebellious against his commandments but they haven't learned that lesson either Samuel is reminding them of how to learn from history and how to respond to God properly get your lives right is what he's saying well it's probably May or June when Samuel says these words May or June you think how on earth can you tell that it's May or June because it's the harvest time the end of the harvest and it almost never rains in Israel at that time of year it is almost always totally dry in verse 16 take your stand and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes is it not the wheat harvest today May or June time I will call upon the Lord that he may send thunder and rain in May or June Samuel never is thundery and never rains at this time of year and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you've done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves 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 is it coincidence and Samuel somehow had a hotline through to the weather bureau to those people who talk to the ABC you know radio presenters and they ring them up and say well what's going to happen and Samuel done that so he knows more than they know no that's not what's going on just like we saw last week as well when God acts in a way that wants to draw attention to the fact that it is God he often announces in beforehand what he's going to do so that it is clear when the event comes how to interpret it see how do you interpret sudden rain and thunder oh is this just a freak of nature could Samuel's

Israelites have said hey this is climate change happening here no it is God's activity we can be sure of that certain of that because Samuel has said it before the event it's an unlikely event thunder and rain in May June in Israel not really likely but it happens that very day there is no other conclusion but this is the hand of God at work the purpose so that Israel may fear God may take God seriously may acknowledge that God is God that his word is not empty he doesn't say things loosely or lightly or trivially if God says something then he keeps his word and what Samuel is again doing by this demonstration of God's power is making them learn the lessons of history where God's word is so clear follow God not idols serve him to receive blessing if things go wrong if crises evolve then analyze yourself and see where you're rebelling against God and confess that sin that's what Samuel's actually teaching here a history lesson driving them back to the seriousness and the sovereignty of almighty

God what God is wanting Israel and us and people in general to learn from history is to fear him to know that God is the God of history the Lord of history and to see his sovereign hand at work rather than trusting in human princes and kings rather to trust in a God who is sovereign in power who keeps his word and who wants people to fear him and tremble before him all the earth but fear is not the final word in this lesson from Samuel the recognition of guilt in verse 19 does not lead to despair as we may think all the people said to Samuel pray to the Lord your God notice their distance not to our God but to the Lord your God for your servants so that we may not die for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves and as we saw a few weeks ago when they first asked for a king there's in one sense nothing wrong with a king per se it's their rejection of God in asking for a king that is the crux of the problem but their recognition of guilt leads to obedience or that's how it should do so Samuel says to the people in verse 20 do not be afraid you have done all this evil yet do not turn aside from following the

[26 : 53] Lord but serve the Lord with all your heart and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save for they are useless now why does Samuel say that why does he in a sense give them another start because God is rich in mercy as verse 22 makes clear for the Lord will not cast away his people for his great name's sake because it is pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself God will give mercy to Israel not because they deserve it not because God finds them cute and adorable not because God finds anything lovely in Israel at all God will give mercy to Israel for his great name's sake verse 22 that is God stakes his reputation on his people and if God is to obliterate his people or punish them or destroy them as they deserve then God's name will be mocked in the world that motivations found many times in scripture in fact God acts for the sake of his name it's there in the prayer of intercession of Moses when

Israel commits the sin of a golden calf and idolatry in Deuteronomy 9 and in Exodus 32 and 33 it's there in Ezekiel 36 as it looks to the return from exile and in many other passages God shows

mercy because he wants his name to be revered through the whole world it's one reason why God sticks with the church today not that we deserve it for the church in history keeps failing in many respects too similarly to ancient Israel but where the church fails God's name is brought into disrepute and so we are recipients of mercy we do not deserve for the sake of the glory of God not our benefit primarily but rather for God's glory and the biblical word for this is grace to receive God's mercy that we do not deserve or merit is grace fear leads to grace or or the fear of the Lord is coupled with the reception of God's grace in this passage it's a fresh start it's an invitation to repent even though through cycle after cycle Israel has sinned and sinned and sinned God's mercy keeps on time and again 70 times seven and beyond it was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved is actually illustrated in this very chapter of the Old Testament it's grace that changes us not simply forgives us but changes our hearts so we read in verse 23 moreover as for me far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you and I will instruct you in the good and the right way here is a pastor teacher in the Old Testament one who prays and teaches praise for the people and teaches the people only verse 24 says 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 well here is a truly remarkable picture of the character of Almighty God despite the persistent sin of his people he brings good for his people and that's how he acts in history think back to Genesis where the evil of the brothers of Joseph to try and kill him or sell him into slavery in Egypt God uses that to bring about good that's the answer at the end of Genesis in Genesis 50 verse 20 you meant it for evil God intended it for good here it is the same sort of thing the people's evil in demanding a king God actually twists around and brings good for his people to teach them to fear him and serve him it's what in fact Romans 8 is on about as well how God brings good out of all situations for those who love him the people sinned in demanding a king but God turned that around to bring them deliverance and to teach them to fear him and serve him with all their heart scholars often argue that in chapters 8 to 12 of 1 Samuel we have two differing opinions of history the pro monarchy and the anti monarchy and scholars try and show different origins or sources they the anti monarchy and then there's a bit of pro and anti and pro and anti it's a sort of alternate view like a debate it's a very simplistic view and it actually doesn't teach us too deeply I think about God but but rather there is an integration here that gives us a subtlety and a profundity about the character of God yes they do ask for a king wrongly it is an act of idolatry but God twists it round to bring good for his people he saves them through this king he delivers them through this king and he does that to teach them that he is God and he alone can save and deliver you see God's actually in the recycling business he recycles our sins and evils into what is good for us and that's what the competing voices so to speak in these chapters actually drive us deeply to understand as he did for in a situation of Joseph twisting evil or recycling evil into good as he does here with a threat of Nahash and the demand for a king as he does in Romans 8 as well and the good that God purposes is not our comfort is not our victory over enemies the good that God purposes always for us is that we be conformed more and more to the likeness of his son that's even clearer in Romans 8 but it's clear here as well because the outcome of God's recycling of evil into good in verse 24 is serve him faithfully with all your heart for consider what great things he has done for you a purified heart that fears and serves that's the good that God twists our own evil to bring about and that's why on a day like Thanksgiving Sunday we have such deep reasons for thanking God not just for nice pleasures and comforts but for actually being in the recycling business from our evil turning it into what is good for us in ways beyond often our expectation or comprehension every crisis God turns and uses to lead us into greater and more faithful obedience every strife that we're confronted with is to drive us to Jesus our King and our Savior and every evil we commit God in his mercy turns for our good to drive us to greater dependence on him and a greater realization of his mercy the Bible is the great history book but not simply a history book the tragedy is what we do not often enough learn from its history and grow from its history and that's what Samuel is teaching the people of Israel in this chapter let us heed the warnings let us see the Bible as an early warning signal to us that we do not fall into the same mistakes as ancient Israel but rather that we take God seriously take his word seriously and recognize always his sovereign mercy amen you