

Who Will You Follow?

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[0 : 00] Good to see you all here this evening. Today, this evening, I'll be preaching on 1 Samuel chapter 12, continuing our series on Samuel.

So, back when I was in school, I did the Duke of Edinburgh's award, and as part of that, as you might know, you have to go on camping trips, which has various results, sending a bunch of school kids out into the wilderness.

And one of these trips we went on was near the Brig of Turk, and we came at a bit of a crossroads on our journey this day. And we'd just walked up a hillside, and we were at a crossroads. We had a decision to make, and it was either go to the southeast, and cross this moor, and go the wrong way, essentially, or go to the southwest, and go through a sort of valley, and go the right way. And if we went across the moor, we would go the wrong way, and we would add a few hours, at least, onto our journey. But, obviously, going the right way, we would arrive on time.

I can read a map and use a compass, so I would say, no, we should definitely go to the southwest, look where the map's pointing in the compass, and look at where the route's going. Well, my friend said, no, we should go to the southeast, it's definitely towards the southeast, we should definitely go to the right.

So, everybody doubted me, not that this is a big-headed thing, and we followed my friend, and we went the wrong way, and we ended up walking a few extra hours, and we had to walk through this moor, through the heather and the bracken, and then we had to walk down a hillside, covered in old, dead, decaying trees, and made very slow and painful progress, as we walked through this thicket of dead, brittle branches and boughs.

[2 : 02] And eventually, once we had done all this, and walked down this hillside, we got back on to the road, and made our way back to the correct route.

But because we made this wrong choice, because we came at this juncture in the road, and made the wrong choice, it added ours, and a lot of pain, onto our journey. And in this chapter, we see the Israelites come to a crossroads as well.

They are presented with a choice to make. They can go with the Lord, and follow the Lord, or they can go their own way, and reject the Lord. They've committed a great sin, by rejecting God as their king.

Despite the fact he saved Israel many times, and blessed them, they can continue to reject God, and be destroyed, or they can go in the right direction, obey, follow, and worship God.

Put away their idols, repent of their arrogance and pride, and make Him their priority, and do what is right. Just like Israel, we have this ongoing decision to make as a church, and as individuals as well.

[3 : 14] The choice to either follow our own sinful, and selfish desires, and worship them, or, we can repent, and we can follow, not our own way, but follow the Lord's way.

This chapter marks the end of an era, the end of the period of the judges. Samuel is the last judge, and as God's appointed leader of the people has gathered them together to address them as Saul takes over as Israel's king.

In the emergency in the previous chapter, in chapter 11, with Nahash at Jabesh Gilead, the Israelites didn't call for God to deliver them, but a king.

And Saul did deliver them, this time. Their confidence in Saul, in themselves, and in their own nation, is founded on one solitary incident they ascribe to him, to Saul, rather than Saul being used by God to deliver Israel from their enemies.

And as we read the chapter, it almost seems like a report from a courtroom, a courtroom that's back to front, where the defendant has put the judge in the dock and is judging them, even in the face of their own guilt.

[4 : 32] So in verses 1 to 5, Samuel gives an account of his leadership of Israel under the Lord. Samuel asked the Israelites, as we heard, in front of God and the new king Saul, if he had cheated anyone, stolen from anyone, or been an unjust judge.

In verse 3, when Samuel asked them whose donkey or oxen he had taken, this is set up in contrast to the king taking the livestock of the people for his own use, as we heard about from chapter 8. In verse 5, Samuel is vindicated as a just ruler and by the Israelites vindicating Samuel, they also vindicate the Lord as Samuel's leadership comes from the Lord and Samuel's good deeds are from the Lord.

So Samuel's been faithful because he followed the Lord and not his own way and not his own desires. Samuel has remembered the Lord, everything he's done for him and Israel and followed the Lord faithfully.

And for verses 6 to 15, Samuel goes on the offensive and confronts Israel with everything God has done for them despite their sin. In verse 7, Samuel says to all Israel, Now then, stand here, 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 ancestors.

[5 : 57] As we read, these verses contain all the righteous deeds of God and his faithfulness to his rebellious people, Israel. They are reminded of the countless times the Lord has led them, delivered them, cared for them and had mercy on them.

Israel perhaps thought that they would hear that God had mistreated them in some way or abandoned them in their hour of need to their enemies. However, from verse 8, God is shown to be the loving King of Israel who heard his people's cries for help and always delivered them out of their enemies' hands.

In verse 9, we read, Because of all this and the cause of all Israel's other sins, they forgot the Lord, their God. They forgot the Lord, their God.

This is, the Israelites are shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Lord is worthy to be followed and in fact is the only one worth following. And this, they forgot the Lord, their God, is a very serious thing for anyone to say, both for the Israelites then and their day but also for us now.

And are we inclined to forget what the Lord has done for us? And although I've criticized Israel here strongly, we should see ourselves in their midst at Gilgal, hearing from Samuel, telling them and us of the Lord's faithfulness and mercy and his righteous deeds for us.

[7 : 24] The Israelites had lost sight of God and who they were in relationship to God and can we be accused of the same? Yes. Do we forget God and who he is?

Yes. Each one of us is a fallen, broken and sinful human being and even though we have the word of God here as a constant reminder of God's faithfulness and redemption all through the Bible, we still often go astray and chase after idols and follow after our own way.

Just like Israel needed to be called back in repentance and be disciplined, we also need to be called back in repentance and faith when we forget the Lord our God. I'm sure as well that we all have personal examples of God's faithfulness to us personally.

However, we all too often put a king in God's place. We chase after idols our own way and forget who God is and what he's done for us.

Some examples, in the West we're inclined to put our careers, jobs and working commitments high up on our list of priorities. We see our bosses and their words, instructions and directions as more important to follow than the Lord's.

[8 : 44] Our work team is more important than our church family. We can put family before God spending more time with them than the Lord. Our friends can distract us and lead us away from the Lord if we're not careful as well.

Even the way we use our free time can take precedence over our God and King. In our modern world of social media and fast news we can feel the pressure of others even in our own homes and what they follow and worship to do the same.

To conform to the culture of our day and forget God in that way and follow our own way and follow other things. And I've put many things in my times since I've become a Christian before the Lord my God and unfortunately I know for a fact as I keep going that my changeable heart will forget God like Israel did and elect and follow another king in his place.

And then in verse 12 the problem of Israel forgetting God is further explained in this instance context at Nahash Gilead with Nahash Jabesh Gilead sorry when at the end of the verse it reads no

we want a king to rule over us even though the Lord your God was your king even though the Lord your God was your king Israel knew the Lord was their king and they owe allegiance to him before all others and to him alone but they let themselves be distracted and led away from following him wholeheartedly as we live our lives will we do the same will we allow ourselves to be led away to follow other things or will we cling to God and follow him wholeheartedly now the Israelites must understand the full gravity of their sin that they've forsaken and forgotten the Lord their God in place of a mortal man like them they've chosen to follow another and a creature like them they've chosen to put a creature in the place of the creator instead of placing all their faith and trust in the mighty God and king who created them the world and brought them to where they are now where they stand in front of Samuel they chose to turn their backs on him and follow Saul instead they knew God was their king and they were not to be the same as the nation surrounding them but rather be separate and different from them and their worship service of the true and living God it was through this difference that the Israelites would draw their neighbours to Israel to worship God that people from all over the world would hear of the mighty deeds of the king of Israel and be drawn towards Israel to swear allegiance to this God and worship him as all men should however in the request for a different king to rule over them Israel are going in the opposite direction and want to become like their neighbours rather than mirroring being an example to their neighbours which is a picture of us and our sinfulness as well we all want to go our own way in opposition to the Lord and his purpose for us then in verse 14 the Israelites and Saul their new king are exhorted to fear the Lord obey him serve him and follow him and even though they've committed this great sin and turned their back on God and asked for a different king if they do this the Lord will bless them although they've committed this great sin the Lord will still bless them and in the next verse verse 15

[12:22] God warns Israel that if they don't fear him obey him and serve him then his hand will be against you as it was against your ancestors continuing that cycle that judges cycle where Israel sin forsake God and then God sells them into the hands of their enemies Israel turning back and crying out to God and the Lord having mercy and delivering them and although I've spoken about the judges cycle here in this incident it's all throughout the Old Testament when Israel forsake the Lord their God and their enemies come against them to draw them back to God their king so Israel have asked for a new king and sinned by forgetting the Lord their God and have been reminded of all his great deeds for them and have been presented with two options two paths to follow either follow the Lord and be blessed or follow a human king and eventually be destroyed and although

Israel as I've said have committed this great sin God is merciful he disciplines Israel by sending a huge storm on the Israelites crops in Israel there's a very small rainy season and if that didn't come at the right time or were shorter or longer than expected the fine balance would be tipped and crops would fail people would go hungry and the local economy would go into meltdown God knew all this and performed this miracle to show his power and to make the Israelites fear him once again after they'd forgotten him and rejected him so they would hear his voice and turn back to following him not in an unreasonable or cruel way but in the way a loving father disciplines his children for their benefit to draw them off the wrong path and back onto the right path for those of you who are parents there are various ways of disciplining your children and various examples of when you've disciplined your children to make them see what they've done is wrong and to show them the right thing to do when a child goes to touch a hot hob their father won't sit and watch them touch the hot metal and badly burn themselves he'll stop them and make them understand that it's not for their own good to do that and show them the correct way to go not out of spite but out of love the right thing for them with this storm the

Israelites are reminded in no uncertain terms that the Lord is God and whoever they choose to be their king is no comparison to him and his power and his ultimate authority but the end of the passage is really astonishing and the end of the passage is really beyond our understanding and our comprehension the Israelites have turned their backs on God they have to be reminded of everything God has done for them again God has disciplined his wayward people but then in verse 20 Samuel says to them do not be afraid do not be afraid it's beyond our comprehension that God has forgiven this trespass but he does up until now it may have seemed like doing gloom that it was over for Israel that God couldn't possibly forgive this sin again but there is hope yet there is good to come out of this not that Israel will learn and suddenly do all the right things and get it right in the future no again like this passage shows us it is because of what God will do and what he has done for his people as we read further in the

Old Testament the Lord will perform many more mighty acts to save Israel and then the ultimate good news God will perform for Israel and us is that the true king came to earth the Lord Jesus came died and rose again so that we can follow him and be saved even at this point which seems so low and so dark we see God's grace mercy and righteousness displayed to his people although Israel have erred so badly God will not destroy them he won't send them away and he won't cast them out of his presence and we likewise will not be destroyed for our sin we won't be sent away and we won't be cast out of his presence and this made me consider how we the church respond to and follow God like Samuel says do we fear God do we serve God and do we follow God or do we turn our backs on God and chase after other things of the world and idols and our own sinful desires so next month on the 5th of

November we mark the gunpowder plot when Guy Fawkes and others attempted to blow up parliament with King James inside unlike this passage Guy Fawkes was not pardoned or forgiven King James allowed the law to take its course and Guy Fawkes was executed for treason like you would expect from any monarch King James let the person attempting to kill him overthrow his authority and the kingdom be brutally executed likewise the Israelites deserved death but the Lord didn't enact the full course of the law but rather showed mercy instead of acting like any other monarch and enacting full justice and destroying Israel the Lord relented and had mercy on his wayward people just like the Israelites we deserve death for our treason and our rebellion but instead we are also shown mercy rather than incur the just punishment our actions deserve and as we read further in the story of Saul and the kings of Israel and Judah that would follow him it appears that all of this was in vain

[18:24] Israel's clamouring for a king as the human kings of Israel and Judah fail they lead Israel away from God into idolatry they forget God and his acts and his mighty deeds for Israel in the past and his promises for the future and they don't keep the law for kings that we've spoken about in Deuteronomy chapter 17 and because of all this Israel eventually splits into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah they continue to sin and not follow God and both Israel and Judah are led away into exile but we can take hope this all acts as tension building these human kings merely make the people of Israel yearn and groan for God's promised king the Messiah the Lord Jesus and how he would lead God's people who will be the king Israel needs that can truly lead Israel in fear in the Lord serving the Lord and obeying the Lord but just like Israel here didn't follow their true king

God they didn't follow the Messiah the Lord Jesus when he came to the earth to save his people from their sins but this didn't stop the Lord Jesus from completing his task and he has indeed freed his people from their sins by allowing a perfectly obedient life dying on the cross and rising again triumphantly from the grave he was rejected once when he came as a suffering servant but there is a day approaching when the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to claim his prize and his bride the church where every knee will bow and all tongues confess that he is king on that day he will not be rejected again all will see him and all will recognize that he is king some in jubilation that the king has finally returned and some in shock but none will be able to reject his authority and kingship on that day of judgment and justice for the church for those who believe that will be a glorious day but for those who reject the

Lord Jesus in life it will be a terrible day when they acknowledge the king that they have rejected who they have not followed in life for anyone here tonight who hasn't decided to follow the Lord Jesus the true king I would urge you to consider your position tonight to consider the path you're on to consider the person you are rejecting and to consider the consequences and where that path will eventually lead so going forward how should this affect our walk with the Lord individually and as a congregation our faith in the Lord and his mercy and his grace his faithfulness and his righteousness and promises should abound more and more each day in the passage God and Samuel are shown to being good and faithful leaders Samuel hasn't defrauded stolen or being corrupt throughout his tenure God's deeds on behalf of

Israel are expounded and show the amazing things he's done for his people Israel yet they still turn away and chase after a man and something ultimately that won't satisfy them and not last however we can see from this chapter where the Israelites went wrong and we can go in the opposite direction use their example as a light to shine us onto the right path to follow the Lord there are any number of things in our modern lives that will try to lead us away from God to lead us away from the Lord to place them in the highest place of importance in our lives our culture puts as I've said

previously a high value on success in the workplace both so you can boast to other people outside and within competition within your own workplace pressure to get promoted and pay rise which often means other things drop down your priority list more time spent at work late nights and overtime and one of the first things to be cut by many is Bible reading prayer and church and time spent with the

Lord our eyes taken off the king and cast on another and for many the first stage of focusing your attention on your job and work is striving at university for good grades to achieve this job later on forgetting that you're there to glorify God and worship him through your studies and not to become fixated on them and to worship them in that way and the pressures of raising children taking them to school extracurricular activities and spending time with them we can get sidetracked and forget the one who's given these good gifts worshipping and chasing after the good gifts themselves the king gives us and in the process for getting his goodness to us many of us are grandparents which has its own challenges and it can be a challenge in itself to keep the Lord as our king and not let our affections and loyalty be drawn from our families from God rather to our families and grandchildren children those of us with no families are no more immune to the temptation of being sidetracked and distracted from

[24 : 11] God for our time and our attention to be given to friends and activities we're involved in hobbies interests and social engagements which will all leave us empty in the end in Scotland and various other places in the west people are obsessed with football and sport and many people play pay more attention to league tables and how their preferred athletes and favourite sports stars are performing than anything else body image is massively important to many people everywhere we turn in social media the television adverts when we're walking around are either trying to convince us to slim down or to bulk up both options taking hours of our time our money thought when we're away from the gym or wherever we exercise and attention most importantly that should be placed on God and then from there we end up worshipping our own image and worshipping the image of created beings and as well in this process of thinking about this we can get distracted by technology most of us have phones and tablets and these things take up a huge amount of our time looking at them and they as well can become a snare to us and our attention in the face of all these other things we become like Israel in this passage falling after other things rebellious and we forsake the Lord our King we forget how he has led us and all the mighty acts he has done for us so we must choose who we follow the real king or an imposter the real king or a usurper in our lives all the good things we receive and all the good things we are a part of have been given to us and we've been led into things by God we need to cling to the

Lord in our lives we should pray and ask the Lord to show us where we forget him and repent of whatever we put in his place whatever that may be and turn back to following him and going on the Lord's path and not our own but when we do fail as we will and we all inevitably will fail in this we will give our affection loyalty time and attention to other things in place of God we should remember what God says to Israel in this passage and remember that he says do not be afraid God will draw his people back to himself when we go down a wrong path with discipline and will not carry out the law as it should be and as we deserve as our king the Lord Jesus has taken the punishment once and for all it's complete for all our disobedience and rebellion and while he carried that to the cross for us to pay the penalty for that and all our other sin just like

Guy Fox was executed we deserve the punishment of the law but because of the Lord Jesus we can stand confidently before God the Father because of the Lord Jesus perfection and righteousness as Samuel says to the repentant Israel they will continue to pray for them and teach them we should be praying for each other in this as well it's all too easy with all these things I've spoken about to become sidetracked and possibly not even realise that we are going down this wrong path we should be praying that we should always follow the Lord as the Lord's people that we should die to ourselves pick up our crosses and follow him pray for our other Christian brothers and sisters throughout the city that they would follow the Lord as well and as a church we should be speaking the gospel and the Bible and God's word to one another instructing each other in the way of the Lord to help each other to follow the Lord so just like me and my friends on my camping trip back all those years ago in school we all have a choice to make we all have two paths in front of us every day and we need to make a decision as to which one we'll go down which one we'll follow that day it wasn't that serious we had to have a bit of an unpleasant walk with our stuff on our back and it took us a lot longer to get to where we were going but this choice is very serious the consequence

of choosing the wrong path and who to follow will lead to destruction if we choose the wrong path but the right path is

God's path and leads to eternal life so will we put away our idols and follow the Lord wholeheartedly will we follow our king or will we reject him and follow a usurper will we follow the Lord Jesus and be saved or reject him and in turn be rejected just in closing I would urge you as Samuel says to the Israelites to fear the Lord to serve the Lord and obey the Lord and pray for me as I've been saying to you to fear the Lord serve the Lord and obey the Lord thank you