

When a Fresh Start is always Possible (1 Samuel 12:1-25)

Introduction:-

Have you ever done something which you later come to bitterly regret? And then when do you, you long for a fresh start in life, if only that could be fully given and realized. This scenario happens to most of us, and in the passage before us today, Samuel begins to reflect upon all that has happened from 1 Samuel 7 right through to the end of 1 Samuel 11:12-15, where at Gilgal, Saul's kingship was finally confirmed before the Lord in a religious ceremony, that most probably also involved the recognition and confirmation of the Lord's kingship over his people as well. And if Gilgal continues to be the place where Samuel's farewell speech in 1 Samuel 12 is also given, then this place was also a vivid reminder to Israel of its association with covenant renewal back at Joshua chapter 5, just before Israel entered the Promised Land. And so, if this is the case, then Israel was being reminded here that the possibility of a fresh start before the Lord was always possible, and was also linked to the need for covenant renewal, especially as this related to its newly installed king, and the peoples' response to the Lord under this new arrangement. Let us now trace this theme throughout this chapter, and its relevance for us today.

1. First we are presented with the Case Against God's People (vv. 1-15)

In this section, Samuel is about to declare the nature of Israel's sin. But his approach anticipates Jesus' dictum about removing the plank in one's own eye, before removing the speck in your brother's eye (Matthew 7:3-5). Thus Samuel begins with a defence of his own position. He has obeyed the peoples' wishes by setting a king over them as their leader. Then, in verse 2, he reminds the people of the very things that first led them to ask for a king back at 1 Samuel 8:5 - Samuel's is old, and his sons are in their midst, although here Samuel does not explicitly mention their misdeeds. These things cannot be hidden, but what can be said of Samuel's leadership? Can it pass the test of closer scrutiny? Back at 1 Samuel 8:6-8, when the people requested a king to rule over them like all the nations, the Lord declared that the people had not rejected Samuel's himself, and his leadership over them, implying that Samuel did take this personally, but rather, the people had rejected the Lord's kingship over them. And now, in a judicial setting, resembling that of a law court scene, Samuel begins by presenting his own case, in order to declare his innocence, before moving on to the sin of the people, in rejecting the Lord's kingship over them. Verse 3 begins with the words, "Here I stand", later used by Martin Luther, with his famous words, "Here I stand, I can do no other", when defending his faith before the imperial Diet of Worms on 18th April, 1521. Samuel also sought the double witness of the Lord and his anointed Saul, in order to fulfil the requirements of the law about lawful witnesses at Deuteronomy 19:15. Then five issues are presented, in which the sin of "taking" is made dominant, referring back to the ways of ancient near eastern kings at 1 Samuel 8:11-18, where Samuel saw the king as one who would only "take" from the people. And so here he now asks them to affirm that he had not taken from anyone, including any receipts of bribes, and that he has always acted with justice and integrity. On this basis, Samuel now asks the people to press the replay button with regard to his own character, which again suggests that before God, character is more important than leadership skills. The point here is that if even one person can challenge him on any of these grounds, then he has no right to raise the issues central to the subsequent discussion relating to Israel's sin in requesting a king. Further, the people will not be able to say that they chose a king because of the failure of the one that God had given them, namely Samuel himself. And in order to reinforce his position, Samuel again returns to legal formulation at verse 5, appealing again to the Lord himself and his anointed king as witnesses, in the case of anyone from among the people who may

still want to dispute any of these claims. Then finally, when the deck is cleared, Samuel the defendant turns Samuel the prosecutor against Israel the accused, in verses 6-15. In this section, Samuel rehearses the Lord's "righteous" acts on behalf of the nation, beginning with the exodus itself, and culminating with the entrance into the Promised Land, where they had quickly forgotten the Lord through idolatrous practices. This then led to their oppression by enemies that the Lord continued to raise up, and their deliverance through a succession of judges, interestingly beginning with Gideon, who is here called Jerub - Baal, because of Israel's continual battle with idolatry in the form of Baal religion within the land of Canaan, indicated at verse 10. Further, Gideon was the first deliverer to only recognize the Lord as their true deliverer and king, finally culminating with Samuel, who delivered Israel in the same way, at 1 Samuel 7. But, in the current crisis, when Nahash the Ammonite came along, wreaking optical destruction on the people, there was no cry for help from the Lord, who had always been Israel's true deliverer and king, but rather the demand was made for a human king. Thus Israel's solution was sought in the direction of structural change and new leadership. But these solutions will not work, if it is not recognized that it is God himself who must build the house (Zechariah 4:6 = Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord). What then is the final solution for the king who has been chosen by the people, even though it is the Lord who set this king over the people, according to verse 13? The answer is that kingship has been established, and is the Lord's gift, even though at this point it has been permitted rather than desired. But in the light of 1 Samuel 11:14-15, where it was necessary to renew and confirm Saul's kingship before God, in order to conform to God's Will, now here in chapter 12 verses 14-15, this is given further detail, and as such a fresh path is mapped out for both king and people, in order to live within the covenant framework of relationship with God. And so, a fresh start is always possible, in spite of Israel's past history of sin and rebelliousness. God is always prepared to start afresh with his wayward people, and he does the same with us today, no matter what we may have done. Notice that in verse 14 this new path has five conditions attached to it, from which blessing flows - We have already noticed Samuel's fivefold character test in verse 3. This new fivefold challenge begins with "fear" which is Deuteronomy's key to success and the life of obedience and blessing. It also reflects the wisdom school's key to success when it says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom" (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). If you will fear, serve, heed his voice, not rebel against his commands, and follow, all will be well." Then in verse 15, If you do not heed his voice, by rebelling against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors. These words resemble the words of Deuteronomy 10:12-13, with its fivefold response, also roughly in the same order, including the blessings and curses of the book of Deuteronomy, where obedience to God's Word brings blessing, and disobedience leads to curse. And so a new start is always possible, that begins with a new fear or reverence for the Lord, that makes service for God and obedience to God's Word a distinct possibility and blessing (cf. Isaiah 57:15; 66:2b = the person to whom God looks are those who are humble and contrite, and tremble at His Word).

2. Next we are presented with a Sign from God Before His People (vv. 16-19)

In this next section, Samuel gave Israel no time to speak or reply. Now he commands Israel to take their stand, just as Samuel did at the beginning of the previous section, in order to now see God's confirmatory sign upon Samuel's words, as well as Samuel's prophetic power at work, in terms of his ability to call upon the Lord, and to see the Lord answer. In this way, a miracle would help to support and give authority to Samuel's words to Israel in the previous section. It was the time of the wheat harvest, when rain was rare, but Samuel called upon the Lord to send a thunderstorm as a sign of the peoples' sin in asking for a king, and as a result, the Lord sent a thunderstorm. This act was most probably also meant to remind Israel of

the events in Samuel's victory over the Philistines back at 1 Samuel 7:7-11, when Israel recognized that only the Lord himself could deliver them from the Philistines, requesting that Samuel should not cease to make intercession for them before the Lord. And as a result, the Lord thundered from Heaven, and brought defeat to the Philistines. And now in the present story, the Lord sent thunder and rain out of season, not only to assert His own divine authority, but also to establish the authority of Samuel's prophetic status and word. As a result of all of this, all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel (v. 18b; cf. Exodus 14:31), and asked Samuel to pray to the Lord your God for your servants, so that we will not die, perhaps through a ruined harvest as a result of the thunder and rain, for we have added to all our other sins, the evil of asking for a king. This sequence of events reverses the pattern of 1 Samuel 7:7-11, but it opened up the possibility of 1 Samuel 12:14-15 becoming a reality for Israel. And thus, a renewed fear of God, would lead the way back to God.

3. Finally, we are presented with God's Grace Over His People (vv. 20-25)

Notice how Samuel begins this final section - "Do not be afraid", in spite of all the evil done, do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart (v.20). And so a great reassurance is here offered to Israel and to us, that people can turn back to the Lord, and serve the Lord, in spite of sin. In the New Testament, Peter is a great example of this, following his threefold denial of Jesus. This is good news indeed!! In fact, the secret of keeping oneself from sinning, is found in "serving" the Lord with all our heart and being, for when we are doing that, we are not serving sin, nor are we giving time or place to sin, allowing sin to take a foothold over our lives. I believe that Paul made this discovery in Romans 6:11-14, when he says that we should consider ourselves as being dead unto sin, but alive unto God, in Christ, in which our bodies are now instruments or servants of righteousness and grace, rather than the servants of sin. After Peter's threefold denial, Jesus restored Peter with a threefold commission to serve the Lord, by feeding his sheep (John 21:15-19). And so for Samuel, the pursuit of useless (or formless) idols should not be an option, because they cannot rescue or save (v. 21). Further, despite their sin, the Lord will not abandon his people on account of "his great name", or character, chief of which is love (Exod. 19:5-6; Deut. 7:7-8). For God has chosen Israel and he will treat them with grace and mercy. A further demonstration of this truth, is found in the fact that God will continue to provide one who will intercede for Israel, as well as teach Israel the way that is good and right, in the person of Samuel himself. Then Samuel concludes in verses 24-25 with his former words: "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." Those reading these words in the later Babylonian exile of the sixth century BC would have understood them as a parable of their own tragic situation. But even then, these words would have offered the possibility of a new start, as even for us today, as we look to the God of all grace.

Conclusion:-

This passage teaches us that a "fresh start" is always possible for us on our Christian journey. Today we need not try to reverse the irreversible consequences of our sin, but gladly accept the fresh grace that comes from God, that also offers us a fresh start, and calls us to obedient and faithful service from this point on. Having seen our great sin, this passage then urges us to see God's greater love and grace towards us, with the offer of a fresh start. Here is grace, greater than all our sin!! Let us rejoice in this wonderful truth today. Amen.