

## GOVERNMENT IN A FALLEN WORLD. PART TWO.

1 Samuel 11:12–13:1

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In Romans 13:1–7, the Apostle Paul gives Christians a framework for thinking about government in a fallen world. There, Paul teaches that government is God's provision for all humanity. "The authorities that exist have been established by God (13:1)."

What do Angela Merkel, Kim Jong-il, Paul Kagame, Hugo Chavez, and Barack Obama have in common? They are all God's servants for the peoples' good (13:4). As Christians, God calls us to pray for and submit to the authority of our leaders in all things, except when what they mandate is expressly forbidden by God's law.

As God's servants, all political leaders will someday stand before him and have to give an accounting for all they have done in the exercise of their offices. Did they faithfully administer justice? Did they use their power for good, to aid those in need? Or did their people suffer at their own expense? Like Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: in the same way they judged others, they too will be judged. (Matt 7:2).

Few of us have any significant influence in the selection of our leaders. But to the degree that we have any voice in that process, it's natural for us as Christians to want to make "the right choice" among the candidates. If one of the candidates is an evangelical Christian, should we automatically support him or her? Here are three principles for government in a fallen world:

1. In theory, mature Christians should make the best leaders. Government in a fallen world is a challenge. Only God knows what's best in the administration of justice and mercy for the common good. **In the ideal world, "the right choice" will be a *leader* who is at one and the same time a faithful *follower* of Jesus.**

2. Practically speaking, it's unlikely that any mature Christians are running for office. It's difficult for a mature Christian to be elected to public office most anywhere in the world, including here in our country and our city. Candidates who self-identify as Christians often do so in order to attract the substantial bloc of churchgoers in our country (almost half the electorate). Consequently, in the real world, **"the right choice" among the candidates is the person who, regardless of religious affiliation, is most likely to administer justice and mercy for the common good.** It is not a betrayal of Jesus to vote for a non-Christian whom you believe will do the best job of governing in a fallen world.

3. Most importantly, victory is not in the election of "the right choice." Rather, it's in the good government of the elected leader, whoever he or she may be. Talk is cheap, and promises made on the campaign trail often go unfulfilled in office. Don't celebrate when "the best choice" is elected president on November 6, 2012. Rather, celebrate and give thanks every time an elected leader administers justice and mercy in a righteous way. In other words, **regardless of who's elected to office, what matters is how they govern in office.**

This is precisely the point at which we pick up the story in 1 Samuel 11:12. But first, let's review the story in 1 Samuel thus far.

## REVIEW

Samuel led the Israelites well for many years. But in Samuel's old age, when it was time to hand the government over to his sons, they turned out to be corrupt. The Israelites rightly demanded someone else. But instead of asking for another leader like Samuel (i.e. like God), they asked to have a king like all their neighbors.

There wasn't anything wrong with wanting a king, per se. God had made provision for this many years earlier. The problem, rather, was that they wanted to become like the nations.

When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God saved them, and then he sent them on a mission to the world. They were set apart to be *different*. They were to be a light to the nations, and under Samuel's leadership, they had made great strides toward this end. But at the end of Samuel's tenure they changed course. Having only just begun, they grew weary of doing well. Instead of being a light to the nations, they wanted to welcome in the darkness.

Back in 1 Sam 8, Samuel warned the Israelites that a king like the other nations had would be a *taker*. He would take their sons into his army, their daughters into his household, their possessions into his holdings, and their taxes into his treasury. In contrast, God gave his expectations for kings in Deut 17. He said that they should devote themselves to God's Word, and in so doing demonstrate love for God and neighbor, through the righteous execution of both justice and mercy. Pagan kings were takers; godly kings should be faithful, kind and just.

How did the Israelites respond to Samuel's warning? 1 Sam 8:19. "No! There *shall* be a king over us. And we *will* be like all the other nations."

So God let them get away with it. He gave them Saul. Our story picks up in 11:12 on the eve of his inauguration.

Keep in mind what we've already learned: **regardless of who's elected to office, what matters is how they govern in office.** At this point, it doesn't matter if Saul was "the right choice." All that matters is how he governs in office. Samuel's right, a king like all the nations will be a taker. But it's up to Saul. He doesn't have to be a king like all the nations. Instead, he can administer justice and mercy in a righteous way. Saul must choose which way he will go.

## 1. THE PRIORITY OF UNITY [11:12ff]

When Saul was elected King, many Israelites celebrated, but others despised him, just like in the USA when a new leader is elected. Then King-Elect Saul led the Israelites to a huge victory against the Ammonites to the East. Saul's defeat of the Ammonites was like delivering on a major campaign promise. So now that Saul has accomplished this mighty victory, what is to be done with Saul's detractors? In 11:13, Saul is gracious with them. Why? Because "today the Lord has rescued Israel." (NIV) Or a more wooden translation from Hebrew: "the Lord has accomplished salvation in Israel."

Want a recipe for ending gridlock in Washington? Try this. Instead of using every political victory as an opportunity for another self-congratulatory press release, why not be like King Saul and use it to build unity, by blessing one's opponents?

This is Saul at his very best, *leading* as a God-follower. In this instance Saul is merciful because God has been merciful to him. (cf. The parable of the unforgiving servant, Mt 18:23ff) God saved Saul and his people, therefore Saul saved his political opponents. Unity is more important than "I-told-you-so's."

## 2. THE PRIORITY OF VIRTUOUS LEADERSHIP [12:1ff].

In 11:14, Samuel says, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew (or inaugurate) the kingship." Many years earlier, Gilgal was the place where the Israelites set up a pillar of 12 stones they took from the Jordan riverbed when they crossed into the Promised Land. There, under Joshua's leadership, they celebrated Passover together, and all the men who hadn't yet been circumcised were circumcised. That first festival in the Promised Land there in Gilgal was a renewal of their covenant with God. This was a formal ceremony, kind of like a renewal of wedding vows, except between king and vassals, or in this case, God and his people. There are a number of these covenant renewal ceremonies in the OT. Each time, the people remembered and gave thanks for God's faithfulness to them, and recommitted themselves to him.

In today's lesson, Samuel takes Israel back to Gilgal for another festival with the same purpose. There, Samuel would give his farewell address, bringing an end

to the period of the judges, and formally handing over Israel to Saul as King. And there he would lead them in renewing their covenant with the Lord.

Samuel begins his farewell address in 12:1 by reminding the people that they refused to listen to him, and to God through him, and instead he has listened to them. "I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you." Ever since he was a little boy, Samuel had listened to God for the sake of the people. But now God is silent, and the people are loud. It's time for Samuel to step down.

A good leader knows the most important principle for government in a fallen world: **regardless of who's elected to office, what matters is how they govern in office.** For this reason, Samuel rightly cares about his record as his completes his term of office. He wants to finish well, to finish clean. So he stands before the people (12:3) and says, "So that you will not ever confuse me with a pagan king, let me know what I have taken, if anything, so that I can make amends and finish well." The people say (12:4) "You have not cheated or oppressed us. You have not taken anything from anyone's hand." Thus (12:5), Samuel finishes with a clean record before the people.

### 3. THE PRIORITY OF VIRTUOUS CITIZENSHIP [12:6ff].

Here's a corollary of the most important principle for government in a fallen world: **Regardless of who's elected to office, what matters is how we as citizens live.** This is the complementary rule for those of us who, instead of leading, are among the governed.

In 12:6–13, Samuel continues with a historical summary of Israel's rocky relationship with the Lord. Why dig up the painful past? Because if their covenant renewal ceremony was going to have any lasting value, they would have to get all the skunks on the table.

It's the same when a couple wants to renew their wedding vows. If they've had a rocky relationship, it does no good to sweep past hurts under the rug. If they want their renewal to mean anything, they've got to acknowledge their sins against one another, forgive one another, and make a fresh start.

Likewise, Samuel rehearsed Israel's history of Israel for their covenant renewal:

- God rescued them from slavery in Egypt through Moses & Aaron. (6–8)
- They forgot God, so God 'sold them' back into slavery. (9)
- Then they repented, acknowledging their infidelity (10)
- Then God gave them judges (11) who delivered them.
- But most recently the Ammonites scared them. Instead of listening to the Lord through Samuel, they told him, "No!" and demanded a king. (12)
- Thus Saul is now king over them by their own choosing (13).

1 Sam 12:14–15 are the key verses of this chapter. Remember that regardless of who's elected to office, what matters is how they govern in office. Here Samuel says essentially the same thing, but expands it to include the people as well. In essence Samuel asks, "Now that you've gotten what you wanted, how will you live?" In other words: **Regardless of who's elected, what matters is how we as citizens live.**

Joshua said the same thing some three centuries earlier at the end of his service as Israel's leader, at another covenant renewal ceremony in Shechem. He said, Now that you've gotten what you wanted, how will you live? The Lord has given us the Promised Land. Now, choose this day whom you'll serve... As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. (Josh 24)

In our passage, the two choices before the king and his people are represented by their two previous leaders. If they choose to listen and obey the Lord, as Samuel has done, they will thrive. If, on the other hand, like Eli they do not listen and obey, they will eventually become deaf to the Lord, and the consequences will be disastrous. This is why when Samuel—the-God-listener puts this choice to the Israelites here in 12:14–15, he emphasizes listening to the Lord. Unfortunately, the NIV obscures the word "listen" in 12:14–15. Here's a more wooden translation of these verses:

*If you will fear the Lord and serve him and listen to his voice and not rebel against that which proceeds from the mouth of the Lord, then both you and the king who reigns over you will follow after the Lord your God. But if you will not listen to the voice of the Lord, but you rebel against that which proceeds from the mouth of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king. 1 Sam 12:14–15.*

In other words, listen, obey and live, or rebel and suffer the consequences.

#### **4. GOD'S GRACE EMPOWERS OUR MISSION**

Does this sound like works righteousness? What about God's grace, no matter what? What about "once saved, always saved"? Will one small misstep cost us God's eternal forgiveness?

No. Thinking about it this way obscures what the Christian life is all about. God doesn't rescue us from sin to give us an eternal "Get out of jail free" card. He created us to serve him. Sin ruined our service, and so God remedied this through the sacrificial death of his Son. Now by his grace we are once again called to do what we were made to do.

Paul puts it this way in Eph 2: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so

that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Two lovers don't get married just to have a full *day* together in their wedding. They get married because they want to have a full *life* together. In the same way, God didn't rescue us just for the sake of Judgment Day. He calls us to relationship, partnership, service—today, tomorrow and forever.

Long ago, God established his covenant with his people for a reason: to bless all the nations of the world through them. He rescued them out of slavery for a reason: that they might be different from all the nations, in order to be a light to the nations. They were a people with a purpose. If they chose to neglect their purpose, God would discipline them. If they chose to live comfortably alongside the darkness, to allow some of it to creep in, God would redirect them back to their mission. Listen, obey and live; rebel and suffer the consequences.

It's the same for us today. God saved us by his grace so that we might do the good works which he prepared for us beforehand. He is leading us and we must follow. Whenever we as God's people stop listening, whenever we become selfish and neglect or forget his greater calling on our lives, he disciplines us in such a way as to bring us back to selfless service in his kingdom.

This applies to us both individually and corporately. Individually, we're people with purpose, and he put us here in this city with this purpose in mind. Whenever we as individuals turn inward and become selfish, God disciplines us, in order that we might yet be faithful to his calling on our lives.

Corporately, I could tell you hundreds of stories of churches that started out just like ours, full of life and passion, bright shining lights in the midst of the darkness. Then after awhile they grew selfish and turned inward, increasingly existing only for themselves, and eventually the Lord gave them just what they wanted. A closed family, that dwindled until it finally died.

This is why at Resurrection we are continually endeavoring to face outward, whether in serving the poor, or starting new churches, or welcoming new people, or giving our money away, or in telling others about Jesus. It's for our own good. It may seem counter-intuitive, but **spending ourselves in mission is the key to our own sustainability**. If we pour ourselves out, then the Lord fills us back up. If we hoard what he gives us, then he warns us and challenges us and disciplines us, and eventually he stops giving.

None of us know when or where the next church plant will be, but all of us should be listening and waiting to hear God's voice. When he calls us to plant, it may mean that some from our congregation will be sent out to start the new church. This is always the hardest part. We hate to see dear friends go. It's

tough saying goodbye to people again and again, especially after investing so much into them. But as hard as this is, the alternative for our congregation is much worse. If we choose to turn off our light, if we turn inward and don't give or serve or share or plant or even welcome new people into our midst, then God will eventually let us get away with it. Sooner or later we'll shrivel up and die. Spending ourselves in mission is the key to our own sustainability.

So Samuel's challenge is for all of us. Choose this day whether you will listen to God and do what he says.

## CONCLUSION

But what happens when we fail to live as God intended? Like a loving Father, God comes looking for us. How will we respond? Will we draw near to him, or will we run away? How we respond says a lot about whether we truly believe the Gospel.

Sin alienates us from God. As a result, whenever we sense his presence, instead of drawing near to him, we want to run and hide in the bushes. He comes to us saying, "Do not fear," but we turn and do precisely the opposite.

We see this in 12:16–18, when suddenly there's a bizarre thunderstorm in the middle of the harvest season, which was as peculiar to them as an earthquake was to us last August. What's going on? God is reminding them of his powerful presence at the very moment that they come to the renewal of vows. God is speaking. Will they listen?

The people are terrified (12:19), not because they're simpletons, frightened by a storm, but because sin alienates us from God. They know they've done wrong. Moreover, they've just seen what God did to the Ammonites. They're afraid, not because they don't recognize the Lord, but quite the opposite. They know him, and they know his power.

And so they cry out to Samuel in fear, saying: "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." Why not the "Lord *our* God"? Samuel described their relationship with God personally in this way earlier in 12:14. But here the people identify the Lord not primarily as *their* God but as *Samuel's*. There's a pattern here, which Saul will repeat three times later in the story whenever he gets into trouble, saying "Pray to *your* God for me, Samuel."

The people are afraid, hiding in the bushes. Samuel responds (20–24) by preaching the Gospel. "Don't run from God," he says. "Don't do it, because it only leads to emptiness" (21). "God will not forsake you. He *wants* you to be his people" (22). "Indeed, I, Samuel, will pray for you." (23). But don't forget what I

said back in 14–15, now repeated in 24–25: "Listen, obey and live (24), or rebel and suffer the consequences (25).

The more we learn about the Israelites, the worse it gets. The complex problems of our federal and local governments face are overwhelming, but they're nothing compared to the depravity and corruption of ancient Israel. That's what makes 12:22 so important. No matter how great their sin, God will not forsake his people. In fact, God has a plan, and nothing can defeat it. In our story, it all begins with a middle-class housewife named Hannah, who trusts in the Lord enough to give over to him that which she desires more than anything else. With this act of faith, everything begins to change, so that ultimately a man after God's own heart is seated on the throne.

But King David isn't the end of the story. He's merely a shadow of things to come. David sins, and his sons much more so after him. But no matter how great their sin, God will not forsake his people. In fact, God has a plan, and nothing can defeat it. In the fullness of time, an angel appears saying, do not fear, for Emmanuel is near. Christ the Son of David comes, and in listening and obeying his Father, he is crowned King of the Jews and enthroned upon a cross. Through his death and resurrection, the complete and total eradication of sin moves from fantasy to certainty, not only for us as individuals, but also for our institutions. (Cf. Isaiah 9:2–7.)

The good news of the Gospel is that we needn't run from God in fear. God *did not* forsake us. The Son of David bore our sins on the cross, and now we can draw near to God by faith. There's no reason to persist in rebellion. By God's grace, we are now free to serve him in the ways he originally intended.

Don't run and hide. God has a plan, and nothing can defeat it. Get with his program. Lay your burdens at Emmanuel's feet. Listen, obey and live, by the power of his amazing grace.