

Date: 18th June 2006
Title: Sin is serious, Grace is bigger!
Passage: 1 Samuel 12
Speaker: Tim Philips

Some of you may have heard of Victor Hugo's famous novel: *Les Misérables*. The main character, Jean Valjean, is put in prison for 19 years having stolen a loaf of bread for his starving family! During his time inside he becomes bitter and angry, he begins to hate society and does anything just to get by. When he's released from prison, he returns home only to be treated like an outsider. But he meets a bishop who takes him in for a night and gives him a warm meal. This was kindness Valjean had not experienced for an incredibly long time. The bishop was a humble man with very few possessions. He had given away most of his riches to the poor. But he did keep some items of silver which held great sentimental value to him. A complete set of silver cutlery and 2 silver candlesticks. When the bishop is asleep Valjean creeps downstairs and takes all the silver cutlery, and then dashes off into the night! It isn't long before the police catch up with him, and bring him back to the bishop for justice. But when the Bishop sees Valjean he runs to him and says:

"Valjean – I see you have the silver I gave you, but why did you forget the candlesticks, they're of much greater worth!"

Valjean is speechless and breaks down in tears. He had never experienced such grace. The Bishop could have had him thrown into prison for the rest of his life. But instead he gives Valjean part of his inheritance – these valuable candlesticks. The only thing the bishop asks Valjean, now that he is free, is that he would live an honest life. That he would put his old ways behind him. I wonder if you can relate to that story. If you can remember a time when you have been shown such grace, when you deserved something very different. All of us who are Christian here today will be familiar with such an experience. Like Valjean we have all been shown incredible grace, only our crime was far greater. Rather than stealing some silver from a kind man, we turned our back on our creator God. We rejected him as our ruler, and tried to live our lives without him. And yet God in his gracious mercy gave us his son to die in our place. To take the punishment for our rebellion, and reconcile us to himself. We now have total security knowing that we are right with God – if we are trusting in what Jesus has done. We no longer face his judgement for rebelling against him because Jesus took it for us! But I wonder how many of us here today in spite of all that, still feel the weight of sin in our lives. How many of us are stricken with guilt. We continue to sin, even in the light of God's grace, even though we know we shouldn't. And that little whisper creeps in; You're not good enough, God could never forgive you, just give up, you'll never make it.

Do we need to be reminded of God's grace and faithfulness this morning?

Well if you need that kind of reminder, I'm really glad you're here today because that is exactly what we're going to see as we continue our series in 1 Samuel

For those who haven't been with us for the past couple of weeks, we've resumed our series in the book of 1 Samuel which is about the activities of God's people, the Israelites, 1000 years BC. God had raised up Samuel, a prophet to be judge of Israel, ruler of his people under Him. But the people in their wickedness had requested a new leader. They did not recognise God as their true King and instead they asked for a king like all the other nations have. Though warned about the trouble this King would bring, they were insistent and so God gave them what they ask for. We saw last week that this new king was a guy called Saul. We read of how Saul was called to this new position, and though hesitant at first, we ended with him delivering Israel, by God's power, from a ruthless enemy. Saul was now King of Israel, and they celebrated in response to their incredible victory. As we start to look at our passage this week it's important to remind ourselves of where the Israelites are.

Samuel, Saul and the rest of God's people are at Gilgal celebrating after that glorious deliverance from the Ammonites. They were also of course celebrating Saul, as their new King. Gilgal was a place of new beginnings. It was the place where the Israelites under Joshua first set foot in the land of Canaan. The land in which they would live under the blessings of God's rule as his people. Just as that entry into the land was a new beginning for God's people, so this event of celebration also marked something new

The start of the reign of human Kings over Israel.

Even though this is a new beginning with King Saul taking power, something else is coming to an end – Samuel's position as ruler of God's people. Saul is now King, so Samuel, who was the judge, must now step down. So here we have Samuel's last words, his final speech as leader of Israel.

Now you may have been to work functions before, which celebrate the retirement of individuals. They're usually reserved for employees who have worked most of their lives at a single company. And in response to their loyal service, a party is held in their name. At some point in this party they'll no doubt be asked to give a speech. This speech normally contains many thank you's, some praise for their fellow colleagues, a description of the wonderful time they've had working for the company and some news about what they're going to do in their retirement, and to cap it off receive a gold watch or something like that.

Well Samuel's speech as he retires couldn't be further from that model. Samuel does not say any thank yous, he doesn't mention any fellow colleagues, he doesn't say anything of what he plans to do in the future. He certainly doesn't get a gold watch or a sun dial or a lounge or anything like that! Samuel makes his speech with one thing in mind. There's one thing that he wants Israel to recognise as he steps down. It's not him, or his achievements - It is their wickedness in asking for this King. They're rejection of God as their true King, and request for a King like all the other nations had. The request that King Saul now embodied!

But before Samuel condemns them for being so wicked he wants to establish something. He uses the language of the court room to do so. Only this time, instead of being the judge, Samuel puts himself in the defendant's chair. Israel are the prosecution and God and his anointed - King Saul, are the witnesses.

12:1-4

Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a King as your leader. As for me I am old and grey, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand, testify against me in the presence of the Lord and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right."

You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand."

Samuel was vindicating himself as ruler of Israel. From the response of the jury who are the Israelites, we can conclude that Samuel was a good leader. He had not used his power to steal, he had not cheated anyone, he had not oppressed any of them for his own gain, he had not favoured the rich over the poor by accepting bribes - like his sons did. He had been their faithful leader from his early days. Samuel was fully exonerated for both his character and his conduct, by the whole of Israel. They can't say a word against him, and the Lord is witness to that!

vs5

Samuel said to them, "The Lord is witness against you, and also his anointed this day, that you have not found anything in my hand". "He is witness," they said.

Samuel is now in the position to judge them. So he switches the roles. Samuel is no longer in the defendant's chair - instead the Israelites and their fathers before them are. Samuel is now the prosecution, the only position that hasn't changed is the witness - who is still the Lord and his anointed.

vs 6

Then Samuel said to the people, it is the Lord who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your forefathers out of Egypt. Now then, stand here, because 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 fathers.

Samuel begins his case by presenting evidence of how faithful God has been to his people. We're given a very brief overview of the history of Israel between the exodus and the rise of Saul, the new king. And we see a pattern emerge. God's grace which is followed by Israel's sin which is followed by God's judgement which is followed by God's grace which is followed by Israel's sin again.

vs 8

After Jacob entered Egypt, they cried to the Lord for help, and the Lord send Moses and Aaron who brought your forefathers up out of Egypt and settled them in this place.

Here was Gods grace – rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt and bringing them his land where they could live in peace under his rule. But in response to Gods grace the people, rather than obey his rule, rebelled against Him. They ignored his laws and seek to be ruled by idols instead.

vs 9

But they forgot the Lord their God, so he sold them into the hands of Sisera, the commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hands of the Philistines and the King of Moab, who fought against them.

So God brought judgement upon them, he allowed them to be defeated by enemies. The same enemies who were allowed to remain in Gods land, by Israel's disobedience. The people cried out for mercy, they admitted their sin against the Lord, their wicked idolatry in following Baal and the Ashtoreths. They asked for deliverance and promised to serve God as they should. And so God in his grace delivered them, by raising up judges one after another. And whilst Gods judge was alive and ruled, the people were safe and followed Gods ways.

vs 12

when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me 'that is Samuel', No! We want a King over us' – even though the Lord was your King.

So Israel had gone full circle again. They had not been obedient. They had not followed the Lord as their fathers promised. So what did God do? In judgement he gave them what they wanted. He gave them a King

vs13

Samuel says: Now here is the King you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the Lord has set a King over you

And yet in the midst of this, he still showed them grace. He gave them another chance to live under him, even with the King they had so wickedly asked for.

vs14

If you fear the Lord, and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the Lord – good!

In other words God would allow them to live under this new King and still receive the blessings of his rule if they both they and the King feared Him. God was again showing great love for his people. But his patience and generosity were not to be taken for granted!

vs15

If you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you as it was against your fathers!

This was not a get out clause for the Israelites. God had been gracious, but his grace was not to be seen as weakness. Well just in case the Israelites were still in any doubt about this sin they had committed by asking for a new king the Lord himself gives testimony against them.

vs16

Now then, stand still and see this great thing the Lord is about to do before your eyes! Is it not the wheat harvest now? I will call upon the Lord to send thunder and rain. And you will realise what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the Lord when you asked you a King.

The wheat harvest was between May and June, a period when rain was incredibly rare. Had it actually rained during this time, it would effect the harvest itself, ruining a lot of good produce. Not only did it rain, the same day Samuel had spoken these things – it poured! These massive grey clouds sweep across what was a totally clear sky. Then the droplets start, which become heavier and heavier and heavier. Huge bolts of lightning appear in the sky followed by great roars of thunder. This was a thunderstorm which would have made our Malaysian ones look very tame. All the Israelites can do, is just stand there in awe of Samuel and the Lord, witnessing the power of this incredible storm. Then, in union they cry out to Samuel

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

Well the jury is out, the defendants have confessed. They have declared themselves guilty in view of the Lords testimony against them. So finally the people repent. They admit the error of their ways. They had been warned time and time again of how asking for a new king was wicked but they had persisted. Samuel had told them the kind of reign such a King would bring, but they refused to listen. At Saul's public anointing as King, Samuel told them of the sin they had committed, yet instead of repenting their response was long live the king! But now, finally, they realise the wicked thing they have done.

Do we ever do things that we later regret? Have we ever persisted in something that we know in our hearts of hearts is wrong? But no matter what Godly wisdom our friends, our family and others give us we carry on? We know what they're telling us from the Bible is sound and right but we just don't want to listen. We choose to ignore God! Until finally we realise the error of our ways – usually the hard way; when the consequence that they've warned us of, actually happens. That was the situation the Israelites were in. Their sin did have consequences. This King that they had wickedly asked for was not going to be dethroned. God was not going to remove Saul now that the people realised what a foolish thing they had done. Saul was going to rule over them as their King. But God in his abundant grace still gives them hope. If they turn back to Him and serve Him faithfully under their new King they will be spared. God would have used this evil thing they have done for his own good purposes

Friends, how easy it is to forget God's grace; the Israelites did. That's why they asked for a new King. They didn't trust their real King, who had already delivered them from their greatest enemies. I think we, like the Israelites are sometimes guilty of forgetting Gods grace in our lives. There will times in the past week, when we have chosen to forget God in what we do. When we haven't lived with his as our King, when we haven't trusted him as King. We've selfishly gone our own way instead. But there is hope. See how Samuel responds in to them. In spite of Israel's wickedness. In spite of their ongoing sin against God. He says –

Do not be afraid. You have done all this evil, yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart.

There is grace. Again and again and again the Israelites had been unfaithful. They had abandoned the God who had saved them from their enemies time and again. Who has shown them grace and mercy time and again. And now they are being given another chance. God could have left his people at the point, they were the ones who had been unfaithful. But he doesn't. Though he loves his people greatly, showing them incredible grace and mercy we're told his ultimate reason for him doing so is not them. God will remain faithful for the sake of his name. Not the people, not Samuel, not Saul, but for the sake of his name You see God had made some very important promises to Israel's forefather – Abraham. He had promised Abraham a nation, a land, and great blessing for both him and his descendants. And that promise still stood. Had God wiped the Israelites off the face of the Earth at this point his promises to Abraham would be broken. So for the sake of his own name, he continues to be gracious despite Israel's sin. But this is not an excuse for Israel to just carry on sinning. Samuel is clear with them about what true repentance will involve:

vs 21

Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless.

This is what they are to turn from. What they are to leave behind, to put an end to. Idolatry. Seeking to replace God with someone else. Instead vs24 – Be sure to fear the Lord and to serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. In view of Gods grace Israel were to serve God faithfully in all they did. They are not going to be alone in this, Samuel will pray for them, and teach them Gods way. But he leaves them with a warning in vs25: If you persist in doing evil, both you and your King will be swept away. We have a fiercely jealous God. One who is perfectly just and deeply cares about the glory of his name. He will not bow to another. He will not accept any other authority in his place. He judges sin and condemns it always. He will not allow it to persist forever. Sin is serious! God judged and punished his people for persisting in sin despite his faithfulness to them. But with his judgement comes grace. He is incredibly merciful and gracious. Every time his people cried out for rescue, he answers their call

For us today he has answered that call permanently

1 Pet 3:18:

Christ died for sin once for all the righteous for the unrighteous to bring them to God

There is only one reason why we stand before God forgiven and that is not our good behaviour. It is not the good we have done weighed against the bad we have done. It is Jesus. The ultimate consequence for our sin has fallen upon him. He has subjected himself to Gods wrath on our behalf. And through us trusting in what he has done we are declared not guilty! Sin no longer rules over us, we are now free to live with Christ as Lord! That is and always will be the only way we can stand with God, rather than stand against him Jesus's death on the cross in our place as we read in our NT reading (*Romans 6:1-14*) That sacrifice was sufficient for all sin for all time. So do not be weighed down by your sins! Do not let Satan deceive you into thinking you're not good enough for God. You've pushed it too far. There's no hope for you now. If it depended on our goodness then we'd be lost in the first place. Trust that you have been forgiven and reconciled by Gods grace alone through the death of his Son

But do turn away from sin – that is the sign of true repentance! Just as the Israelites were to turn away from idols, so we are called to put to death sin in our lives. We no longer live with sin and death ruling us, now we live with Christ as Lord. Gods grace teaches us to say no to sin. It isn't an excuse to continue sinning, rather it is the means to stop. Some of us may ask – well isn't God just spoiling our fun? How can it be true freedom if we're told not to do something! The Israelites may well have thought that too, look where it got them. God isn't a spoil sport. He is a loving Father. He gives us such commands for our own good. He loves us dearly, and wants the very best for us. In this world we are constantly being sold the lie that sin is better. The best way to live life is to live life without God. But it really isn't! Sin has consequences. Consequences that not only effect us but hurt those close to us as well. Our own sin can damage relationships. Bring greater insecurity. Causes us to doubt in Gods faithfulness. Hardens our hearts against his word. Makes us more perceptible to the lies of the world! We should be fleeing from sin, seeing the empty promise that it is. It will not bring a better life – only disappointment and death. But in the times when we do fail to honour God, and do sin against him remember: repentance is always possible. God is ever willing to forgive and forget. So never believe that you've fallen to short of being forgiven. Gods grace is bigger than our sin. Let's be trusting that, and living lives that honour him this week, in response to his amazing grace.

Sin is serious and does have consequences – but God's grace is bigger!