

“Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart.”²¹ Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless.²² For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own.²³ As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.²⁴ But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. (1 Samuel 12:20-24)

God will not Abandon You!

What would you do if your spouse committed adultery? There are a number of different possibilities, right? But in the end, most of them fall into one of two choices: either you divorce your spouse or you decide to rebuild your marriage. Jesus himself allowed for divorce in the case of unfaithfulness. When that happens, it’s sad; but it’s hard to blame that husband or wife for getting a divorce when their spouse has betrayed them. In fact, if someone we cared about – a sister or brother or a child – were betrayed like that and then chose to stay with that unfaithful spouse, we might think they’re crazy. We might figure that they’re just going to get hurt again and they should cut their losses now. Sadly, many times we would be right. But sometimes, a person chooses to love and forgive and stay, even though he or she knows that could be the result.

This morning, I don’t really want to talk about marriage and divorce. Rather, I want to use that example to talk about our relationship with God. Many times the Bible compares our faith to marriage. God calls worshipping a false god adultery – spiritual unfaithfulness to the God to whom we promised to be true. While God doesn’t use that terminology in our text for today, he does treat his people like a loving spouse who forgives them when they have been unfaithful. And there is a very important promise for you and me in that truth: **God will not abandon you!**

I.

This morning, God makes that pledge to his people in the face of their failure to appreciate his love. He calls them to be just as faithful to him as he will always be to them. And that call applies to us, too. **God will not abandon you! Don’t replace him with false gods.**

The man who spoke the words we have before us today was Samuel. He spoke these words at his retirement ceremony. After years of giving God’s message to God’s people, he wanted to give them a final encouragement to be faithful. He pointed back to a demand the people had made not long before this. They had asked for a king. For four hundred years, Israel had been a theocracy. That means that they were ruled directly by God through prophets and priests and a special class of leaders that God called judges. Samuel was the last of those prophet-judges. When he was about to retire, the people demanded a king. Samuel was upset. But God told him, **“Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.”**

Now, they were not actively worshipping idols. To all outward appearances, they still worshipped the true God. They came to his sanctuary. They offered his sacrifices. They prayed to him, even after God gave them their first king, King Saul. And yet, in this final public address to them, Samuel warned them, **“Do not turn away after useless idols.”** He recognized that it’s a short step from rejecting the way God wanted to run their lives to outright unbelief and idol worship.

Hebrew has a bunch of different words that we translate as “idol.” All of them mean something. The word Samuel used here literally means “emptiness” or “unreality.” He told them not to trust in fake gods. He went on to say, **“They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless.”** And that’s that same word, “nothings.” Right before he spoke these words, he did a miracle. In the middle of the dry season when it almost never rains in Israel, Samuel called up a thunder storm. The skies darkened and thunder crashed and rain poured down on them. The people were terrified. No idol could do this. No idol could rescue them when they were in trouble because no false god is real.

Why would anyone trade in the one true God for something that can’t help you at all? You and I need to ask ourselves that question. Like Israel, we do confess faith in Christ our Savior. Like Israel, we pray to him, we give offerings on Sundays, we come to church. But like Israel, there is always a temptation for us to

compartmentalize our lives. We have our faith, our Sunday worship, and we have the rest of our lives. When you're sick, where do you put your trust? In doctors? In medications and therapies? When and where does God come in? The reason Israel wanted a king was to defend them from their enemies. They forgot that God was the one who would defend them, no matter who was in charge of their army. God is the one who cares for us. Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't go to doctors. Certainly, I would not encourage you to go to a doctor who has lost your confidence. But at the same time, God is the one who works through doctors to take care of us. When we forget that, we're short step from forgetting who the real God is.

My friends, even if your doctor totally screws up, God can still do miracles and restore your health. The same can be said for our bank accounts and our retirement plans and our jobs. If the government shutdown destroys our economy and our savings become worthless, God will still take care of us. When we forget that, our jobs and our retirement plans and our doctors and all the other things that we trust for things of this life can easily take God's place in our hearts. They become idols that lead us away from the one true God. If that process goes to its logical conclusion, we would lose our faith and spend eternity in hell.

But God is still there. He brings us back to where we need to be. Yes, he does do that by warning us of the danger. But then he reminds who our Savior is. Of all the people who ever lived, the only one who never lost sight of God's role in his life was Jesus. Even when he was a child and he depended on his parents to feed him and clothe him and keep him warm at night, he trusted that God gave him those parents and that God worked through those parents and that God would take care of him, even if those parents didn't come through. All his life long, Jesus put everything of this life and everything of the life to come in his Father's hands. That's why he could live as a traveling preacher, without a home, without a salary, without any kind of medical insurance or retirement plan or social security. He trusted in his Father and he did the work his Father sent him to do. He was even willing to let Roman soldiers torture and crucify him because he trusted God's plan to save us through that horrible death. That perfect faith of Jesus counts for you and me.

And then Jesus died on that cross. He suffered hell itself, because death and hell are what we deserve for all the times that we make idols out of money and doctors and retirement plans. Jesus paid all that our sin deserves. Then he rose. When he rose, God the Father declared that our sin is erased. When he rose, God promised that we will rise and live with him forever. When Jesus, the Son of God and the true child of Mary rose, he promised us love and care every day that we are here, with heaven to come after. With a God who loved us so much that he did all that for us, why would we even consider trusting someone or something else in his place?

II.

Samuel stressed that never ending love of God. He understood that the message of God's love is the power of God. Today, we call it the gospel. It makes us believers and keeps us in the faith. **God will not abandon you! Don't forget all that he has done for you.**

Samuel said, "**For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own.**" That's the gospel in the Old Testament. God took a nation of slaves who were on the verge of being exterminated through the genocidal policies of the kings of Egypt and he rescued them. He reigned plagues down on Egypt and led his people out in triumph. He gave them a country of their own and protected them for centuries from external enemies and even from their own unbelief and idol worship. And most important of all, God promised that through them the Savior would come. Israel was the chosen people, chosen to be the human ancestors of Christ. When they trusted in God's promises to send a Savior and to preserve his people, they were trusting in the same Jesus that you and I trust in. They were trusting in the same forgiveness that Jesus won for us on the cross and in the empty tomb.

God has made us his people. And for the sake of his great name, he will not reject us. Now, at first that might sound kind of egotistical. It might sound like the kind of thing we hear about in connection with lawsuits where some hospital or company or even government entity will pay whatever it costs to avoid having their names dragged through the mud. But that's not the point at all. Rather, God is saying that it isn't up to us to keep God faithful. In the ancient world, most religions were an exchange. The gods demanded certain actions and certain sacrifices. And if you did them, it didn't matter what was in your heart. But if you didn't do them, those religions taught that the gods would make you pay. But our God isn't like that. He doesn't love us only when we do what he wants. He will always love us. That does make him better than any other god or any other religion out there. And God wants that word to get out, not for ego's sake. But for our sakes. Only by faith in

him can anyone reach eternal life. So God holds up his promises even when we don't deserve it so that we sinners can see and trust in Christ.

Samuel said, **“As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.”** Because God loves us, he sends us pastors and teachers to care for us spiritually. It is my job, like it was Samuel's job, to teach you what is good and right. Certainly, that means teaching you to live as God commands. But what is good and right is more than just what we're supposed to do. It's my job to teach you to see Jesus. God's doctrines are all good and right. In a world that doesn't appreciate them, God sends guys like me to teach them to you. And he sends us to pray for you, even when you sin. We pastors are supposed to pray for the straying, for the unfaithful, for the hurting, for the sad as well as for the strong and rejoicing. And God promises to hear and answer all those prayers we offer for you. Think how often your children have been blessed because their teachers prayed for them in the privacy of their own homes or in the classrooms long after those kids went home. Think how many pastors in your life have gone to the throne of grace for you and how God has answered those prayers.

God never leaves you. Even in the hurts and sorrows of your life, he is working for you. Even when you sin and he allows consequences to come into your life and they hurt, he does that because he loves you. He does it because he wants you to know him better and to follow him more closely. He does it because he wants you to reach eternal life.

He does call us to follow him here. Samuel said, **“But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.”** Fearing the Lord means faith. Serving him with all our heart means to serve him with sincerity and joy in all that we do and say. And it all comes from knowing his love. Consider the great things he has done for you. He sent his Son to die for you. He raised his Son and forgave you. He called you to faith and made you his. He teaches you and strengthens you. He stands with you in every sorrow and he will bring you home to heaven. When he returns, he will raise the dead and remake the world and you will live with him in joy forever. That is what he has done and what he will continue to do for you. The story of those great deeds of God is the power to change our hearts.

Sometimes after a spouse has been unfaithful, their husband or wife will choose to stay with them for pure love's sake. It seems totally foolish to us, but love forgives. Every time we sin, we are unfaithful to God. He would have every right to walk away from us and leave us in hell. But his love for us never fails. No matter how much we deserve it, he will never abandon us. Cling to that promise and live for him. Amen.