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 1 Samuel:
 The Crossing Fates¹
 First Message
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A NATION IN DESPERATE NEED OF CHANGE

An Introduction to 1 Samuel

As we approach the national election this week, the primary word that has dominated the campaign is CHANGE. After a war that has gone on longer than anyone anticipated, and an economy that has tanked beyond belief, everyone is looking for a leader who will bring change. Early in his campaign, Senator Obama adopted the slogan, “CHANGE WE CAN BELIEVE IN!” Not to be outdone, Senator McCain countered with “CHANGE WE ‘CAIN BELIEVE IN!” In my humble opinion, no leader will be able deliver the change the public is after — a quick fix to the consequences of decades of choices motivated by greed.

For the last two decades our nation has been led by the baby boomer generation. We grew up after World War II in the golden age of the 50’s. Unlike our parents, we did not live through a depression or endure the horrors of two world wars. Through the sacrificial efforts of our parents, many of us started out on second base before we even stepped up to the plate. We had privileges our parents never dreamed of. We viewed ourselves as “the largest, the best educated, and the wealthiest generation in American history.”² Our cheerleaders’ incessant drone was, BELIEVE IN YOURSELF, FULFILL YOUR DREAMS. But sadly, it wasn’t long before a spirit of entitlement eroded all sense of responsibility and integrity was eaten away by greed. In a furious frenzy of credit cards, dot.com initiatives, stock options and sub-prime mortgages, dreams of wealth were redefined by extending the boundaries of credit beyond the scope of rational comprehension. And now that the bottom has finally dropped out, the American public seeks a leader for a quick fix to cover our iniquities lest we feel the weight of bankrupt sorrow.

For many of you the national psyche may seem similar to your own. Perhaps you feel disillusioned with your dreams, as years of compromise have eroded a once vibrant faith. Or perhaps financial consequences, which you were capable of fending off for years, have finally caught up with you and a lion of debt is now knocking at your door. Whether you feel trapped in a miserable marriage or demoralized by addictions, perhaps like our nation, you are ready for change.

If it is change you long for that is what the kingdom of God is all about. But it is change that is far more radical and revolutionary than any political leader can deliver. Bruce Waltke writes in his Old Testament Theology that the central theme that unifies all of Scripture is “the irruption (breaking in from without), not eruption (breaking out from within), of the kingship of the holy, merciful, and only God.”³ He further explains that the Bible makes a distinction between two dimensions of God’s kingdom. First, there is the universal kingdom of God. This speaks of God’s sovereign activity in all the creation, where he exerts control over all that he has created. All are subjects of this kingdom, though they don’t know it. But secondly, there is the particular, mediatorial kingdom of God. This speaks of God’s sovereign activity wherein he establishes a realm in which his subjects know him, worship and adore him as the Triune God. This is summarized in the Lord’s Prayer, where Matthew writes,

“This then, is how you should pray:
 ‘Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,

**your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt 6.9-10 TNIV)⁴**

As Christians our role as God’s vice-regents is to become agents for God’s glorious rule to irrupt on earth. Do you know where to look for this kingdom to irrupt in your world? Do you know the kinds of people God uses to establish his rule? Do you know the means his people use to lay hold of it?

Today we embark on a new series in the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Samuel. These texts trace the radical changes in God’s restructuring of his kingdom, from the spontaneous and temporary rule of charismatic judges, to an established monarchy with a king after God’s own heart. Never was a nation in more desperate need of change than Israel in the aftermath of moral chaos that erupted during the reign of judges. Israel faithfully served the Lord under the leadership of Joshua, but after the death of his generation, “there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which he had done for Israel” (Judg 2:10 NASB). Rather than taking God’s word seriously, and dealing ruthlessly with the evil ways of Canaanite worship, Israel became fraught with compromise and “followed the other gods from among the gods of the peoples around them, and bowed down to them...so they forsook the LORD and served Baal and Ashtaroth” (2:12-13).

Israel’s apostasy led to a downward spiral of sin and destructive behavior that lasted four hundred years, culminating in moral anarchy and a complete societal breakdown. This grand finale of Judges is summarized in two appendices documenting tragic events that took place in the hill country of Ephraim. These accounts are almost too chilling to relate. Fokkelman summarizes this finale of horror:

Judges ends with a catastrophe, showing us a nation in decay, where everything is enacted in the same central zone round Jerusalem (Gibeah, Shiloh and Bethel on one side, Bethlehem on the other), which so often forms the epic space of the books of Samuel. Priests emerge as boorish materialists, mass rape occurs, and the nation overreacts with punitive measures so wanting in moderation that anarchy is total. As well as the corrupt tribe of Benjamin, the city of Jabesh beyond the Jordan is shown to be an especial victim – the population is almost entirely wiped out, the marriageable virgins carried off – as is a city on this side of the Jordan, the cultic centre Shiloh, where premeditated large-scale abduction is brought off, and that during a religious festival of all things. First Sam. 1 stands out against the background of these its immediate antecedents.⁵

Many are familiar with the story of Hannah, especially the pain of her barrenness, followed by her prayer and vow that culminates in the birth of Israel’s first prophet, Samuel. But these events cannot be fully appreciated unless we view them against the backdrop of the dark days of Judges. This morning my task is to give some observations from the book of Judges on the nature of compromise and its effects among God’s people, as preparatory to Israel’s need for a king with a heart after God. This link between Israel’s moral chaos under the judges and the need for a king is clearly seen by the narrator’s repeated refrain in the appendices:

- a In those days there was no king in Israel,
every man did what was right in his own eyes
(17:6)
- b In those days there was no king in Israel (18:1)
- b' In those days when there was no king in Israel (19:1)
- a' In those days there was no king in Israel,
every man did what was right in his own eyes
(21:25)

Signs of Compromise Among the People of God

I. Tolerance Becomes the Supreme Virtue

Having abandoned God's moral absolutes as expressed in his Torah (specifically the Ten Commandments), the Israelites adopted "tolerance" as their highest virtue. The result was that "every man did what was right (*yashar*) in their own eyes" (17:6; 21:25), which Moses strictly warned Israel against (Deut 12:8), and Israel's sages later denounced as utterly foolish, reckless, and shortsighted (Prov 12:15; 21:2). Fokkelman gives an insightful reflection on the usage of this Hebrew term:

The word means "right" in the sense of "straight, flat," and it is prepared for by the suspect choice of a Philistine bride by the judge Samson (Judg 14:3, 7). Samson describes his bride as "the right one" for me (Judg 14:3). My explanation of the sentence "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" is such that "straight" relays ego; one simply took the quickest way of satisfying one's desire, one's ambition: right away, without more ado. The word suggests the unreflecting and sensual immediacy of "I like it": all moral soul-searching being unnecessary.⁶

You can read 618 verses of Judges and not once will you find an act of genuine repentance, or a time when a leader's actions are rebuked in the light of God's word. When Samson barks out a request to his parents, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife" (14:2), they respond meekly, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" Samson's belligerent demand is not only disrespectful to his parents, it also makes them co-conspirators to idolatry, violating no less than four of the Ten Commandments. Yet his parents do not censure their son in the light of God's word; instead they make him a victim of circumstance. Knowing that dad would offer the least resistance, Samson makes his second appeal to him, based on her attractiveness: "But Samson said to his father, 'Get her for me, for she looks good to me'" (14:3).

The door to compromise opens wide when in order to inform our conscience we replace God's revealed word with the cravings of desire. When this occurs, a glaring absence of integrity in male leadership usually follows.

II. Women Are Forced To Take the Initiative

Because men were given the mantle of spiritual leadership both within the home and in the nation, whenever moral restraints were removed in Israel, women often rose up as the last line of defense against social anarchy. In the days of the judges, men became passive in confronting evil in the home and lacked courage to go to battle for the sake of the nation. With a vacuum in leadership, heroic women took the initiative to fill the gap. When the prophetess Deborah calls Barak to holy war against Jabin, the king of Canaan, she is stunned that he refuses to fight the Lord's battles unless she accompanies him. Barak is a weak-willed wimp! The word of God is not sufficient for him to trust; he needs tangible evidence of God's presence. Like many of his contemporaries, Barak is like a frightened schoolboy who needs his mother present to keep his faith strong. So to get the job done, Deborah assumes that motherly role:

Villagers in Israel would not fight;
they held back until I, Deborah, arose,
until I arose, a mother in Israel. (5:7 TNIV)

After God grants a decisive victory, she memorializes the greatness of his sovereign power in a poem. In it she sings a plethora of praise to the brave hearted leaders who willingly risked their lives for the kingdom, while heaping scorn on those whose earthly comforts compromised their courage to fight:

Why did you stay among the sheep pens
to hear the whistling for the flocks?
In the districts of Reuben
there was much searching of heart.
Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan.
And Dan, why did he linger by the ships?
Asher remained on the coast
and stayed in his coves. (5:16-17)

If it took a woman's initiative to begin the battle, it also took a woman to finish it. After Barak routed Jabin's army, Sisera, his commanding general, abandoned his chariot and fled on foot, taking refuge in the tent of a former ally, Heber the Kenite. But Heber is nowhere to be found. Instead, his wife, Jael, against all cultural norms, takes the initiative to greet the general and invites him into her tent. Like a good mother she knows how to put a tired son to sleep. He asks for water, but instead she gives him a skin of milk (I wonder if it was warm). It works like a charm. After he is fast asleep she drives a tent peg right through his skull, violating the family peace treaty for a higher cause. Because of Barak's initial lack of faith to trust God in the battle, the honor for killing the Lord's enemy is given to this remarkable non-Israelite woman, Jael. She is celebrated with no less than 13 lines of poetry:

Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
most blessed of tent-dwelling women.
He asked for water, and she gave him milk;
in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.
Her hand reached for the tent peg,
her right hand for the laborer's hammer.
She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his temple.
At her feet he sank,
he fell; there he lay.
At her feet he sank, he fell;
where he sank, there he fell—dead. (5:24-27)

I wonder if we might be facing a similar situation today. Has compromise in the church produced a generation of passive males who lack the ability to be decisive, risking all for the kingdom of God? Where are the young men who will take a stand for what is right and confront evil in the workplace, men who risk their jobs for family priorities, who initiate hospitality and reach out to foreigners? On the flip side, I observe that there is no lack of young women who are eager to take on heroic roles for the sake of the kingdom.

III. A Disconnect Between Empowerment and Ethics

The third sign of compromise is evidenced when there is no integration between empowerment and ethics. In Judges we observe that because the majority of the male population lacked faith and initiative, not only were women forced into taking extraordinary initiative to survive, but also a powerful manifestation of God's Spirit was required to empower these reluctant leaders. Seven times in the book it is said that the Spirit of the Lord "came upon," "clothed," "began to stir," or "rushed, came upon mightily," upon a judge. The Spirit's empowerment became manifest in feats of mighty strength, as when the Spirit came mightily upon Samson "with power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare

hands as he might have torn a young goat” (14:6). On another occasion, after the Philistines had bound Samson with ropes and brought him to Lehi, the Spirit came on him with such power that the “ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men” (15:14-15). But, as Daniel Block observes, these charismatic feats of might do not “presuppose any particular level of spirituality on the part of the recipient. To the contrary, this divine intrusion in human experience seems to graphically describe YHWH’s arresting men ill-disposed toward resolving Israel’s problems and his equipping them for the saving task.”⁷

The great tragedy of Judges is that there is absolutely no correlation between the Spirit’s empowering presence and the character of the judge. The turning point of the book is the story of Gideon who, despite being “clothed” with the Spirit of the Lord, is a tragically flawed leader. He is spiritually dull, with no expectation that God is at work among his people. He is very reluctant to accept the privileged call of God to deliver his people. He refuses to trust God’s word and seeks sign upon sign to bolster his weak faith. It is only after the fourth confirmation, when he hears the promise of God repeated in the dream of an enemy soldier, that he finally steps up to lead God’s people.⁸

After four hundred years of judges, one thing should be painfully clear to the Israelites when selecting their future leaders: *charisma without character equals disaster!*

IV. Passive In Battle, Aggressive In Sensuality

The irony of compromise is that while Israel’s leaders were passive in doing battle for the Lord, they became extremely aggressive and often violent when gratifying their personal passions. Though it took great effort to launch Gideon into holy war, it took little to set off his rage. When his fellow countrymen refused to aid his pursuit of the Midianite kings, his fury boiled over into bloody vengeance. Gideon is the first judge in Israel to slaughter his own people.

As to Gideon’s ultimate aspirations, the Israelites recognized that he had a gift that could be of great benefit to the nation. After his victory over the Midianites, they asked him if he would consider serving his people as king and establish a ruling dynasty. His initial response seems pious and humble: “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.”

But Gideon could not keep his real motives hidden for long, as he is quick to follow up his refusal with just one request:

And he said, “I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder.” (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.) They answered, “We’ll be glad to give them.” So they spread out a garment, and each of them threw a ring from his plunder onto it. The weight of the gold rings he asked for came to seventeen hundred shekels, not counting the ornaments, the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian or the chains that were on their camels’ necks. (8:23-26)

Gideon doesn’t want the job of a king, but he certainly wants to live like a king. And he doesn’t even blush when he names his price (3,400 golden earrings = 42 pounds of gold). Talk about initiative. He wants a large condo on the golf course, a harem to satisfy his sexual cravings, and a son whom he names “my father is king” (8:30-31). Gideon’s final act was to make a trophy to himself from the wealth he gained from the spoils of war. It wasn’t long before this golden ephod was more treasured in his city than God himself. For a man who seemed so reluctant to lead God’s army he certainly didn’t lack initiative when it came to his personal retirement program or his lasting legacy.

By the end of the book the lust for wealth has infiltrated the priesthood, so much so that priests are actually selling themselves to the high-

est bidders. And rather than giving people an appetite for God’s word and condemning idolatry, they are becoming gluttons by feeding on the idols of the rich.

Are you compromised? Do you present a gentle exterior that is seldom stirred over injustice, sex trafficking, or our gross consumerism, but you can spend an inordinate amount of energy strategizing ways to satisfy your personal cravings?

V. Rituals Ravage Relationships

One of the greatest indictments against religion is when ritual becomes more important than relationships. How often does misguided zeal foster a spirituality that has no connection with reality? Sometimes the disconnect is so bad that even the world reacts in horror.

Such was the case with Jephthah, the mighty warrior from Gilead. Jephthah grew up hated by his two brothers because he was the illegitimate son of a prostitute with whom his father had relations. When the brothers grew up, they drove Jephthah out from their home lest he share in their father’s inheritance. Victimized by rejection, he compensated for his feelings of inferiority by becoming violent.⁹ In the land of Tob, far to the north of Gilead, he became a powerful warlord over a band of thugs.

Back in Gilead, the elders had their hands full with the Ammonites, who had assembled against Gilead. With war imminent, there was no leader among the tribe who would volunteer to lead the battle. Rather than seeking the Lord in prayer, the elders tried to maintain their power by hiring a cheap gun to defeat their enemy. Ironically, whom should they choose but Gilead’s disinherited son, Jephthah, to lead the battle. After some dicey negotiations, Jephthah agrees. Just prior to the battle, in what may have been a rare display of genuine spiritual affections, he makes a vow to God:

“If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” (11:30-31)

Gilead’s former outcast now becomes the savior of his people. He secures a swift and easy victory, devastating twenty Ammonite cities. Bathing in his victory and newfound acceptance, he returns home to pay his vow. But he is ill prepared for who comes out of his home to greet him:

When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had no son or daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot take it back. (11:34-35)

Here is his one and only daughter dancing with delight over his victory, whose life he has now jeopardized by a rash and stupid vow. What was he thinking? Who or what did he expect to come out of his house to greet him after the victory – the family cow or pet ox? Shock and sorrow overcome him, but sadly, it is all about him, not his daughter. He blames her for his troubles, as if “she kept him from his full potential as leader.”¹⁰ He doesn’t consider what her death means to her, but to him. Nor does he even pause to consider that the law forbade child sacrifice, which would cause him to admit his vow was stupid and he would have to repent. As an extremely insecure person he cannot endure the shame of annulling his vow for the sake of his daughter’s life:

So she said to him, “My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.” (11:36)

In contrast to Jephthah, his daughter shows honorable character by making the ultimate sacrifice: she submits to her father's rash vow to preserve his reputation in the community. Jephthah has never seen such love as this, but he cannot even give voice to one word of thanks lest he be forced to own up to his own stupidity. His daughter breaks the awkward silence with one request to soften the blow:

She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me; let me alone for two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions." Then he said, "Go." So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity. At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year. (11:37-40)

We read these verses in stunned horror. Did Jephthah actually follow through on his vow? Was he so self-consumed that he couldn't even shed a tear? Were there no more words than just, "Go"? Do men like this actually exist? The answer is yes, for compromise takes everything human out of us. And the account of a father sacrificing his daughter is not the end of the story. Things get brutally worse. But I think you have endured enough to get the point. Compromise destroyed the fabric of Israelite society.

Why did God allow it to go on so long? I don't know for sure. But Ray Stedman once said, "God allows the fruit to rot on the tree before he takes an axe to the roots." I think he was right. But I also suspect that without sufficient time, a nation (or in our case, an individual) is not ready for the change that God wants to bring. In Israel's case the change was going to be radical: there would be no government bailouts.

As for the gluttonous priests who made themselves fat and neglected God's word, their day was done. God was going to clean house and appoint an entirely new priesthood worthy of the office.

As for the spiritual center of Israel, the sanctuary at Shiloh, which had become a den of thievery and prostitution, it was about to be wiped off the face of the map. Jerusalem would take its place.

As for leaders who led by charismatic gift but were self-serving and did not sacrifice themselves for God's people, their days were over. God was going to institute an eternal monarchy with a king who would be a man after God's own heart. And to protect the office from abuse, God would institute the office of prophet, whose responsibility was to be God's voice to the king.

As for the instrument God will use to get this "start up" rolling, it will be as in the days of Judges, begun by a woman's initiative. Like Deborah, Hannah will be a mother in Israel, a mother to Israel's kings. She will model for them how to bring God's kingdom from heaven to earth, not through charismatic feats of strength but through fervent prayer. Her spiritual transformation through prayer will become the model for David's psalms. She will teach the king how to be honest in his laments and bold in his praise. Her voice will reveal that the secret to true strength lies not in a king's wealth or his armies, but in humility and trust. If a king has success, it will be to the degree that he listens to her voice. Kings may come and go, but Hannah's voice resounds with the piercing clarity of a church bell, one that leaves a deep impression and lasts for years, yes, even centuries, until it finds its final resting place on the lips of Mary, the mother of the King of kings.

This King was the final solution to Israel's desperate need for change. He was a king who never compromised.

Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

¹ This title is taken from the second volume of Jan Fokkelman's masterful four-volume work of narrative analysis in 1 and 2 Samuel. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis, The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1986).

² Tom Brokaw, *Boom! Voices of the Sixties* (New York: Random House, 2007), xiii.

³ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 144.

⁴ Adapted from Bruce K. Waltke, "Humble Rulers: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel," Regent College BIBL 521, Lecture Notes, 2000.

⁵ J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 1-2.

⁶ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 6.

⁷ Daniel Block, *Judges and Ruth* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 151.

⁸ My observations on Gideon are adapted from Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 602-603.

⁹ This is Younger's observation. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges, Ruth* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 275.

¹⁰ Waltke notes that the LXX adds *empepodostateōkas me*: "you have thwarted/hindered/put a check on me." Bruce K. Waltke, "Light from the Dark Ages: An Exposition on Judges and Ruth," Regent College BIBL 615, Lecture Notes, 2004, 106.

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