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1 Samuel 7:7-17

Thirteenth Message

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HOW FAITH FIGHTS

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

The Fourth of July commemorates the ratification of our nation's birth certificate, the Declaration of Independence. John Adams, one of the authors of the document, said to his wife, Abigail, "I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more."¹

There's no doubt that we have fulfilled John Adams's wish. Though I take great pride in our founding fathers and the freedoms we have as Americans, I have mixed feelings when we sing the words "the land of the free and the home of the brave." There are several reasons for this, but the main one is that I have a loyalty to another kingdom that transcends my national identity. The Bible tells us that there is a glorious revolution going on, as God is calling out a people for his name from among every nation. He is creating a new humanity from Abraham's seed that will outnumber the stars in the heavens. As citizens of that community we are engaged in a war of liberation, setting free those who have been held captive by the destructive nature of sin and death. We do this by heralding the good news of the gospel: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and now offers the gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, to live life abundantly to as many as will receive him.

This is the revolution to which we have been called. It is the fight of faith. But how does faith fight? Does God expect us to take any initiative? If so, how much initiative do we take? Are we to use means that are set before us or depend solely on supernatural intervention? What then is the relationship between the divine and human roles in warfare? Our text very simply but profoundly sets forth how faith fights at each stage of the conflict: first, in preparation before the fight; then in the heat of the battle; and finally, in the aftermath of victory.

I. How Faith Prepares for the Battle (1 Sam 7:3-9)

A. Purifying the heart in confession (vv. 3-7)

And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only. Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." (1 Sam 7:3-6 ESV)

In our last study we saw how Samuel seized the opportunity when Israel's hearts were especially tender towards the Lord, to exhort them to nail down those feelings to a life of commitment to God. Before renewal could take place, the people had to repent by putting away their idols and recommitting their hearts to serve the Lord alone. To our great surprise and delight, Israel did that. After four hundred years of being paralyzed with a divided heart, the nation finally took responsibility to rid

every vestige of idolatry from their lives. Once they purified their hearts, Samuel directed all of Israel to gather at Mizpah in order to renew their covenantal vows with the Lord. Mizpah is derived from a root meaning "watching," most likely because of its strategic location as a military outpost or observatory ("watchtower") high upon Israel's central ridge. Mizpah played a key role in the finale of Judges as a place "where the people assemble for matters of decision and the swearing of oaths."² Now the city will take on new significance as Israel eagerly "watches" for the Lord's presence to return in the renewal of her wedding vows.

Unfortunately, the joyous celebration will be cut short, as some uninvited guests are about to crash the party.

Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. (1 Sam 7:7)

The Philistines too were "eagerly watching" the festivities at Mizpah. They saw the occasion when Israel was preoccupied with repentance as prime time to launch a military offensive. A similar strategy was employed by a coalition of Arab states led by Syria and Egypt when they launched a surprise attack against Israel on Yom Kippur, October 26, 1973. It should not surprise us that the enemy attacks when God's people have finally taken initiative to get serious about their relationship with the Lord. Immediately after Israel's most wondrous Passover that pried the door open to exit Egypt after four hundred years of slavery, Pharaoh's elite chariot corps was ordered to annihilate the fledgling nation. Millennia later, just after Jesus gave the Passover new and greater significance in the upper room, he and his disciples experienced the greatest satanic assault of their lives.

From the devil's viewpoint, worship leaves God's people defenseless and therefore vulnerable to attack. Ironically, however, though physically vulnerable, it is the cleansing of the heart in worship that best prepares God's people for the battle. It is pure hearts, cleans hands and a good conscience that enables us to fight by faith. We can't do battle with a divided heart, as the author of Hebrews wrote,

...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. (Heb 10:22-23)

This is why, before the Israelites ever engaged in battle, Moses commanded the officers to assemble their troops and go through the ranks, identifying anyone whose trust might be weakened by a divided heart (Deut 20:1-8). Such a condition could arise from fear or other distractions that probe the heart when an individual has not fulfilled a major responsibility, whether leaving a home half-built, a new vineyard planted but not harvested, or a fiancée engaged but not married. These are weighty responsibilities which, left undone, could mar one's reputation in the community. Therefore it would be unreasonable to expect such an individual to keep his eyes fully focused on the Lord during the battle. Once identified, the individuals were sent home lest they jeopardized the faith of the others.

Victory in holy war depends not on numbers but on faith, for “nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few” (1 Sam 14:6). Knowing this may give us insight into why the apostle Paul refused to take John Mark on his second missionary journey, when he abandoned Paul and Barnabas on the first journey. The ground breaking work of evangelization and church planting requires a seasoned faith, steady courage and an undivided heart, not just willing volunteers. Only those who can serve with the whole heart and not compromise major commitments at home should venture forth.

B. Praying with a dependent spirit (vv. 8-9)

Hearing the report of the Philistine advance, the Israelites were terrified—and for good reason. The Philistine nation was the icon of military, economic and technical power. Like the Nazi panzer divisions that swept through Eastern Europe, these ancient warriors were highly organized, efficient, and far superior in military might than Israel’s volunteer and weaponless army. Few in Israel could forget the horror of the last war: 34,000 dead, Shiloh’s sanctuary destroyed, and the ark of the covenant taken captive. With such heavy losses it is conceivable that almost every family in Israel lost a relative. Who would not fear a second invasion?

And the people of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.” So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. (1 Sam 7:8-9)

But what the enemy designs as a threat, God uses as a test to confirm the authenticity of Israel’s repentance and strengthen her trust in the Lord. For the first time in twenty years, Israel turns to God and fortifies her faith by prayer. With one voice the people beseech the prophet Samuel to continually intercede on their behalf: “Do not cease to cry out to the Lord God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.”

The root of the verb “cry out” designates a loud, emotion-laden cry that arises out of acute distress. More than a mere reaction to the pain, it is often simultaneously a cry of pain and a plea for help.³ Until now the root was used in Samuel to give voice to the cry of pain (4:3; 5:10). This is the first occasion when “the cry” also reaches out for God’s assistance. Having left their hometowns to worship in Mizpah, the people have an acute sense of their vulnerability and inadequacy to combat the Philistines without divine aid. Instead of presuming on God and manipulating his presence, they seek him through an authentic relationship based on repentance and prayer.

Samuel heeds their request, interceding by word and ritual. A whole burnt offering (from the root *‘alah* “to ascend, go up”) symbolized total dependence on God, because the entire animal *ascended* in smoke. The prophet’s choice of a nursing lamb for the offering is perhaps symbolic of Israel’s spiritual tenderness and vulnerability. Just as a newborn lamb is absolutely dependent on the life of its parent for nurture and protection, so now is Israel in her renewed relationship with the Lord. For the first time in this generation’s experience the Lord is at the center of everything, signifying that the covenant relationship is being restored.

C. A paradigm for prayer in the Psalms

Like most of life’s conflicts, more often than not the outcome is determined long before the conflict begins. Preparing for holy war by confession of sin and petition to God for deliverance became the paradigm for the faith of Israel’s king David. It finds its greatest expression in Israel’s prayer book, the Psalms. It is important to understand that the psalms are not the ordinary prayers of Israel’s “everyman.” They are first and foremost the petitions and praises of Israel’s king, who is marshaling all of God’s heavenly resources to bring all nations under his rule:

**“Ask me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” (Ps 2:8-9)**

Of the 150 psalms, 50 are “petition” psalms beseeching God to deliver the king in some kind of crisis or distress. As God’s anointed, it was the king’s responsibility to “cry out” when he was in distress, and it was God’s responsibility to “save the king” out of his distress. The psalms are battle prayers designed to bring God’s rule from heaven to earth, prayers that have been tested, tried and true for three thousand years. Like most of the Jews of their day, Jesus and the disciples memorized the entire Psalter. The psalms’ supreme value is seen on the cross, where David’s inspired metaphors became literal reality for Jesus, giving him spiritual nourishment and divine strength to conquer evil (Ps 22:1; 31:5; 34:20).

How can we consider engaging in the world’s conflicts each day without it?

The apostle Paul commands the Ephesians to devote themselves to prayer on behalf of all believers as they seek to share the gospel:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Eph 6:18-20)

Even though Paul was a veteran evangelist and apostle, he confessed that, just like us, he needed his fellow believers to pray for him while he was in prison. Being fully submerged in a very pagan environment, surrounded by Roman guards, he needed God’s wisdom to know what to say and then the courage to say it without compromising it.

Once we have prepared our hearts through confession of sin and prayer, how then do we engage in the battle? In vv. 10-11 we are given insight in how to differentiate the divine and human roles in spiritual warfare.

II. How Faith Engages in the Conflict (1 Sam 7:10-11)

A. Waiting on the divine initiative (v. 10)

As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel. (1 Sam 7:10)

Immediately after Samuel prayed, verse 9 says, “the Lord answered him.” But it is not until verse 10 that we discover just how the Lord answered: it was a thunderstorm of “shock and awe.” Arriving at the exact moment of Samuel’s offering, it seals the Lord’s approval of Israel’s repentance. But in the distance it has just the opposite impact on the advancing enemy troops. The thunderclap resounds with such force it creates a great panic and “confusion” among the Philistines. This was in accordance with God’s promise that he would throw their enemies into “confusion,” just as he did the Egyptians in the Exodus (Exod 14:24) as the sign that he was going before them into battle (Deut 7:22-23).

Using thunder as a divine weapon to soften up the enemy was God’s trump card to shatter their faith in Baal, the Canaanite storm god. Baal is depicted as holding a club, representing thunder, in one hand, and a spear, representing lightning, in the other. When the Creator-God and Lord of the Universe steps on the stage of history, wielding Baal’s weapons against the Philistines, their high tech, state-of-the-art weaponry looked like children’s toys in comparison. The proud Philistine war machine melts before the majestic display of God’s mighty hand. The

battle is played out exactly as Samuel's mother scripted it. One line from Hannah's poem tells the whole story:

**Those who contend with the Lord shall be shattered;
Against them he will thunder in the heavens. (1 Sam 2:10)**

This remains an important principle for the church as we engage in spiritual warfare. We should never presume on God, engaging "spiritual forces in heavenly places," unless we have first prayed to make certain that God has gone ahead of us to prepare the way.

B. Courageously engaging in the battle (v. 11)

And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car. (1 Sam 7:11)

Once God has gone ahead of his people to soften up the enemy with a divine panic, his people are then expected to courageously step out into the conflict to complete what he has begun. Tsumura outlines this divine/human dance with a simple comparison of the subjects and verbs:

- v. 9 the Lord *responded* to [Samuel]
- v. 10 the Lord *thundered*...*confused*...they were struck
- v. 11 the men of Israel *marched out*...*pursued*...*struck*

Though God acts according to his sovereign will, human beings have the responsibility of acting by trusting in God's actions at the right moment.⁴

And yet, even when Israel enters into the battle, she has little to do except pursue and strike down the troops already fleeing in terror. It all hinged on God's marvelous "thunder" that reversed Israel's role from "being pursued" in fear, to courageous "pursuer."

The apostle Paul was very mindful of these principles as he discerned where and when to plant new churches in Asia Minor. When making advances into gentile territory with the gospel, he was very sensitive to go only where the Lord had first prepared the stage ahead of him. But once the divine will was revealed, Paul courageously went forward without delay:

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:6-10)

After Paul and Silas came to Philippi, their preaching of the gospel created quite a stir, especially when it had a financial impact on those who made substantial profits from idolatry. An uproar ensued, and Paul and Silas were flogged and sent to prison. What happens next is the New Testament version of the divine panic:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. (Acts 16:25-26)

The earthquake erupted as a divine answer to Paul and Silas's prayers and songs. To the prisoners it announced freedom, but to the jailer in charge it meant death. Waking from sleep, he drew his sword to kill himself, but Paul intervened and announced that none of the prisoners had escaped. Struck with terror, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (16:30). Now before a very captive audi-

ence, Paul preached the gospel. The jailer took them home, washed their wounds, and everyone in his household believed and was baptized.

This is the joy of the fight. As we step out by faith our fears suddenly give way to confidence, and confidence swells into elation as we embrace the privilege of playing a role on the divine stage of redemption. This is how faith fights.

Now we come to the aftermath of victory.

III. Faith in the Aftermath of Victory (1 Sam 7:12)

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the LORD has helped us." (1 Sam 7:12)

When the battle is over, it's not really over, for after a victory we are extremely susceptible to pride and the temptation to rob God of the glory that is due him. To prevent this from happening, Samuel set up a memorial stone similar to what Joshua did at the crossing of the Jordan (Josh 4:4-7). Samuel named the stone "Ebenezer," meaning "stone of help," and said, "till now the Lord has helped us." You may be familiar with these words from Robert Robinson's 1758 hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*:

Here I raise my Ebenezer,
Hither by Thy help I'm come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

The stone served two functions. First, unlike most of our Fourth of July celebrations, where there is much national pride, Samuel had learned from his mother to give all glory to the Lord alone. Israel's hymns of thanksgiving and praise follow suit. Whenever God delivered the king or the nation in answer to the king's prayers, all praise went directly to God, with little or no mention of the human dimension in victory. We need to follow Samuel's example and create symbolic reminders of God's gracious interventions in response to the cries of our prayers. On my front porch I have embedded five stones for our five children as reminders of God's miraculous intervention to us after the first two died.

The second function of the Ebenezer stone was a reminder that though Israel could celebrate a great victory that day, the grand mission of God was far from over: "Thus far the Lord has helped us." "Thus far" has both a spatial and temporal significance. The stone not only served as a memorial of thanks to God for a crucial victory, it also became a continual prod to Israel's faith to press on and on. The people of God can never rest secure on the past victories of their forefathers, especially when there is so much ground to be conquered.

As we celebrated the Fourth of July, I was reflecting on how little freedom there really is in this country. The land of the free may be free from foreign domination, but we are tyrannized by the idolatry of wealth, power, technology, immorality, pride and power that run as rampant as Philistine idols. As believers let us be committed to venture into new territory and fight the battle unto death, for death shall be our greatest victory for the kingdom.

But you may ask, can such a victorious life of faith be sustained over the long haul? Was Israel's recommitment to the Lord just a momentary renewal of religious affections, and her victory over the Philistines just a quirk of good luck?

IV. Peace at Last...that Lasts! (1 Sam 7:13-17)

A. Peace on all fronts (vv. 13-14)

So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. The cities that the Philistines had taken from

Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath, and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites. (1 Sam 7:13-14)

The narrator is quite emphatic that Samuel's persistent training of Israel in the radical art of trust had a lasting impact. The Philistines were driven back to their coastal cities, losing all the territory they had acquired west of the central ridge, and they ceased to be a threat during the remaining tenure of Samuel's office. Not only was the foreign threat put to rest, Israel also enjoyed a domestic tranquility with the Amorites. As Tsumura explains, "The Amorites were the pre-Israelite population of ancient Canaan; the term is used here in the widest sense, referring to the totality of indigenous inhabitants... Israel was safe both internally and externally."⁵

The reason for such a rare and lasting peace was due to the faithful and godly character of the prophet who led the nation.

B. Peace sustained by godly leadership (vv. 15-17)

Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would return to Ramah (*haramata*- the longest form of the name), for *there* was his home, and *there* also he judged Israel. And he built *there* an altar to the Lord. (1 Sam 3:15-17)

The narrator concludes Act 2 of 1 Samuel by describing the circuit of Samuel's travels year by year, city by city. It wasn't the geographical scope of the circuit that gave Samuel national influence (for the cities mentioned comprise a fairly small territory within Israel), rather it was Samuel's consistency and regularity.

Samuel knew that faith must not only be acted upon in the moment of crisis, it must also be nurtured on a regular basis, year in and year out for a lifetime. Along with repentance and prayer, Samuel guides the nation in the administration of justice. Bruce Birch explains: "In the administration of justice, the covenant community seeks to create structures that make for wholeness (*shalom*) that is the goal of covenant life to which God has called us."⁶ Four times in this chapter, Samuel is described as acting as a "judge" (vv. 6, 15, 16, 17). This is more than any other judge in Israel, suggesting that Samuel's justice was ideal, mirroring the holy God whom he served. Different from the charismatic judges who preceded him (Judg 8:23-27), Samuel chose not to profit from his exploits. Rather, he faithfully trained Israel to respond to the cries of the oppressed and raise them up to positions of honor. For this brief period in Israel's history the people of God were faithfully trained in the art of repentance, prayer and justice. When God's people devote themselves to these disciplines, they abide in everlasting *shalom*.

In similar manner, Jesus focused his ministry in a small geographical area of three cities, Capernaum, Korazin, and Bethsaida, known as the "Evangelical Triangle."⁷ It was here in "Galilee of the gentiles, by way of the sea," that the light of justice and peace dawned upon "those walking in darkness" (Isa 9:1-2).

In the last verse the narrator brings us back to chapter 1, emphatically reminding us that behind this faithful leader was the faith of his mother. In Samuel's circuit he administered justice in Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, all historic cities richly laden with memories of the patriarchs Joshua and Judges. These places would be equivalent to Washington D.C., New York City, and Philadelphia. But what is so remarkable is that none of these cities had much pull on the prophet. In the next verse we find where his true loyalty lay—in Ramah! Lest there be any doubt, we hear the emphatic "there...there...there!" In appreciation to the spiritual heritage given to him by his mother, Samuel transformed his little hometown into both the civic and religious center of the nation. It is there he judged Israel, and there he built a new altar to the Lord. By building an altar there, Ramah replaced the corrupt Shiloh as the spiritual center of the nation. Hannah did not need to make her yearly travels there anymore, for her son had brought the "new Shiloh" to her.

And therein lies the important role mothers have in shaping their sons for "the good fight." May God grant us the grace to be as faithful in shaping the next generation in the faith of our forefathers. Amen.

¹ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3 July 1776, "Adams Family Papers, An Electronic Archive," The Massachusetts Historical Society. Online: <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17760703jase> cond.

² Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 66.

³ R. Albertz, "za'aq", TLOT, 3:1088-93.

⁴ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 237-8.

⁵ Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 240.

⁶ Bruce C. Birch, "1 Samuel" (NIB; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 2:1022.

⁷ Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992), 33-35.