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2 Samuel 8:1-9

Fourteenth Message

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WHY CAN'T WE BE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE?

SERIES: *THE CROSSING FATES*

After Jesus had been flogged to a bloody pulp, beyond human recognition, he presented him before the people:

[Pilate] said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." (John 19:15)

In my last two series, in the fall of 2008 and spring of this year, we examined the first act in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, which trace the story of Israel's first prophet and final judge, Samuel. We come now to the second major section in 2 Samuel, which spans chapters 8-12 and traces the transition in Israel's government from the spontaneous rule of charismatic judges (or "warlords") to the centralized power of an earthly king. After three decades of faithful service by Samuel, the elders asked him to step down and appoint a king as his successor. This seemingly innocent request by the people for a king ignites the narrative with fiery tensions and painful trauma that will characterize Israel's story for the next five hundred years. Why such trauma? you ask. The answer is found in the names of the two leading players in the drama, *Samuel* and *Saul*. Samuel means, "asked of God." Hannah named the boy in appreciation to God as an answer to her pleading prayer. Samuel was God's choice, a judge and prophet given to the nation as a gift for answered prayer. Saul's name means "asked" as well, but it has no object. As the narrative makes clear, however, Saul is the people's choice. And therein lies the tension—God's choice versus the people's choice, God's ways and the world's ways, which are irreconcilable.

As to the relevance of these stories, Paul writes,

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Cor 10:11 ESV)

These chapters will be especially enlightening to us in the church. They demonstrate how prone we are to compromise our faith for worldly security. But in our dogged persistence to have our own way we blind ourselves to the terrible consequences. On the other hand, they also give a penetrating look into the heart of God. Though deeply grieved by our refusal to trust him, he reluctantly gives us what we ask for. And then, like a parent with a rebellious adolescent, he has to endure the consequences with us as the relentless cost of compromise weighs in to purify our hearts so that we learn to trust in him alone.

I. The Setting: Samuel and his two sons (1 Sam 8:1-3)

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice. (1 Sam 8:1-3 ESV)

The setting for our text is when Samuel is "old." With two full-grown sons, as much as thirty years may have passed since his defeat of the Philistines at Ebenezer and Israel's covenant renewal (1 Sam 7). It's time for a new generation to take over leadership in Israel. As Samuel is about to step off Israel's stage and enter into retirement, it is good to be re-

mindful of the things that made his career one of the rare highlights in Israel's history. Samuel was Israel's most significant spiritual leader since the days of Moses. He single-handedly rescued Israel out of the deepest spiritual depravation in her history and restored her to an authentic relationship with God.

No doubt his mother's faith and humility left a deep imprint on Samuel's soul. At a very early age he learned the importance of prayer and how to distinguish between the voice of God and that of his teacher. Samuel proved faithful to that voice and delivered God's word unadulterated, with great courage. As a result, "the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord" (3:19-20). As Robert Bergen observes, "Samuel is the first judge in the Bible who was accorded truly national status—eleven times in the Hebrew Bible, Samuel is noted as leading all Israel or at least being influential throughout all Israel."¹

During times of international crisis, Samuel courageously served Israel as a military commander, igniting the people's faith to depend on God alone. In peacetime he was Israel's champion of justice, ministering as a circuit judge and priest, nurturing Israel's faith year in and year out. For these few decades in Israel's history the people of God were faithfully trained in the art of repentance, prayer, wisdom and justice. As a result of Samuel's faithful leadership, Israel fully enjoyed that rare gift of *shalom*, shielded by God from oppressive forces both at home and abroad. In those days, prayer, faith and righteousness proved more powerful than the impressive Philistine war machine, for "the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel" (7:13).

But, like even the best of leaders in the Old Testament, Samuel had feet of clay. In an attempt to provide leadership for the next generation, he appointed his sons as judges over Israel. Though Moses directed that local judges be appointed for every tribe (Deut 16:18), the judges who were called to serve on a national level to deliver Israel in times of crisis were not appointed by men but sovereignly chosen by the Spirit of God as the need arose. Is this a lack of faith on Samuel's part, pre-empting the Lord's direction by "appointing" his sons as judges, creating dynastic succession?

Samuel's sons have godly names, reflecting the godly aspirations of their parents: Joel means, "Yahweh is God" and *Abijah*, "My father is Yahweh." Perhaps Samuel believed that their early dedication to the Lord would be as effective as Hannah's dedication was of him. But on the other hand, why did Samuel assign his boys to serve in the desert of Beersheba, the southern outpost of the land? What civilized person would want to live on the outskirts of the wilderness? Did the father not trust his sons? Was this unusual geographical assignment given in the hopes of minimizing the damage he knew they would do?

Our worst fears are confirmed in verse 3. Just like Eli's sons, whose greed "perverted" the sanctity of the sanctuary, so now it is for greed that Samuel's sons are "perverting" justice. Because their hearts have "turned aside" to dishonest gain, accepting every bribe they could get their hands on, justice is "turned aside" (Exod 23:6,8; Deut 16:18f; 10:17). When Mo-

ses appointed judges and elders, he made sure they were free from the love of money:

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. (Deut 16:18-19)

Samuel must bear some responsibility for the situation. Clearly he failed as a parent to pass on the covenant fidelity to his sons. Worse yet, we hear no rebuke from the father. Cognizant of the swift judgment that God had brought upon the nation when Eli's sons desecrated the sanctuary, the tribal elders convene a national assembly to take decisive action.

II. The Elders' Request for a King (1 Sam 8:4-5)

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." (1 Sam 8:4-5)

The last time the elders convened it was their collective wisdom that suggested fetching the ark as a good luck charm in the battlefield (4:3). Their spiritual ignorance then is matched by their lack of tact now. When they address their distinguished leader, they open by saying, "Behold you are old." Bodner points out, "It may have been more prudent to begin by saying, 'Behold, you are wise,' or 'Behold, you have judged us well.'" Instead, they greet Samuel like a worn out racehorse ready for the glue factory. Then they confront him with the hard facts concerning his wicked sons. Samuel's age and the failure of his sons serve as the pretext for a bold request: "Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations."

The request reaches back to ancient promise that God would bring a line of kings from the seed of Abraham (Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10, Num 23:21; 24:7), one that was recaptured in the historic prayer of praise that Hannah recited at Samuel's dedication:

**"The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the power of his anointed." (1 Sam 2:10)**

On the surface it appears they are attempting to address the current crisis with good theology and his mother's faith. But the final card in their hand exposes their real motive— they want to be "like all the nations." Not only do they desire a brand new kind of government, i.e., a monarchy, but the kind of monarchy that removes all their holy distinctions as a nation. And the adverbial "now" reveals just how impatient they are for such a change. They refuse to wait for God's best for them. They want a king *now!* Impatience is a form of rebellion, as painful to God as idolatry.

How can Samuel object? If the prophet can "appoint" judges, who have failed, why not "appoint" a king, one to their advantage ("for us") to be a permanent solution to deal with "injustice" in Israel?

It's not until chapter 12 that we discover the real motivation underlying their request:

"...when you saw that Nahash the king of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, 'No, but a king shall reign over us,' when the LORD your God was your king." (1 Sam 12:12)

Prayer allowed Samuel to penetrate behind their false piety to the real issue, which was fear. It must have proven difficult for an agrarian society to live a life of faith, trusting God to be their King and deliverer, sandwiched between two powerful warring neighbors, the Philistines in the west and Ammonites in the east. With no standing army or king

to lead them, every international threat had to be met by depending on God through prayer. Israel never knew how or through whom God would deliver them. Though God's record of faithfulness was impeccable, the nation grew weary of the whole process, and finally cried out, "Why can't we be like everybody else!" The life of faith is very demanding. There comes a time when all of us long for the security that the world offers.

As a young boy I had friend in Newport Beach who often took me sailing. I find sailing an apt metaphor for our spiritual journey. A sailboat is a remarkable vessel of transportation. With very little technology you can travel to almost any port of call in the world. Sailing enlarges your horizon as you are plunged into the open sea that is swarming with life, fresh air and blue sky. Its nonstop action is so invigorating as one is totally dependent on the wind and currents by day and the stars by night. But there is no autopilot when it comes to sailing. You can't let your guard down and drift. You have to remain in constant touch with the larger world around you, especially in inclement weather and turbulent seas, or you could perish.

But for the faint of heart and the rich there is the "Love Boat," those overgrown, opulent ocean liners. Climb aboard and for but a small price you can have someone else navigate the seas, cook your meals, make your bed, watch the weather and battle the storms. All you do is sleep and eat and eat. For all who sail the seas of faith it is a difficult temptation to resist.

III. Samuel's Inner Response (1 Sam 8:6)

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the LORD. (1 Sam 8:6)

The translation "But the thing displeased Samuel," is at best an understatement for the more vehement Hebrew, "But the thing was evil in the eyes of Samuel." The phrase "evil in the eyes of" is normally used with God as the subject when his wrath is greatly provoked against his people for idolatry. It is used as a key refrain in the book of Judges (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1, 10:6; 13:1), and is standard fare in the book of Kings, where evil dominates. The phrase not only speaks of God's inner emotions that have been pushed beyond the boiling point but of his severe judgments that immediately follow, where God delivers his people over to his enemies, forty years of wilderness wanderings (Num 32:13), or in some cases, even death (Gen 38:7; Deut 17:6).

Displeased? Samuel is so furious he cannot speak! Yet what angers him is not that Israel is throwing away her holy distinctiveness (the last phrase, "like all the nations," is left out), but the fact that he is being asked to demote himself by appointing a king to take over his rule. Samuel takes their request personally. But to his credit, though stung with fury, he vents his anger privately before the Lord.

We are not privy to his conversation, but it doesn't take much imagination to envision his complaint: "O Lord, did you hear them? 'You're old, worn out, a failed father. Pack up your office and leave.' No severance package, no thanks after forty years of faithfulness, no retirement dinner, no parting gifts, not even a watch! Instead they define my entire career by my irreverent sons, whom I admit are not fit for office." In case you may have idealist visions of retirement, the Bible will set you straight. Few saints end their pilgrimage of faith on the golf course.

After Samuel vents his fury in prayer, God cares for the prophet's damaged emotions, settles his angry spirit and restores him to a healthy perspective so that he can once again minister effectively.

IV. The Lord's Surprising Response (1 Sam 8:7-9)

And the LORD said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have

rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” (1 Sam 8:7-9)

A. The theological tension: *“listen to the voice of the people.”*

Now we learn that the elders were representing the voice of the people in their request, deepening the wound. How can Samuel “listen” to their voice? Who rules this nation, the people’s whims or the prophet’s word? The people are supposed to be governed by the voice of the prophet, not the prophet by the people! It all sounds absurd, especially when we consider God’s condemnation of Adam: “Because you listened to the voice of your wife...cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen 3:17). The tension is further heightened when God adds “concerning all they say to you.”

B. It’s not about you, it’s about me

God now becomes pastoral in his care for his wounded prophet. He explains to Samuel that if he had not been listening selectively but had paid careful attention to all they had been saying, he would have understood that their request was not about him but about God. Though Samuel is mature in the faith, like us he is still prone to take the actions of others as personal attacks on his character.

In Israel’s case, their request for a king to rule them was the culmination of their perpetual addiction to idolatry. Though they may have removed physical idols from the land, this request to be governed “like the nations” (under the guise of “justice”) was nothing more than idolatry. Wanting the *right* thing the *wrong* way is worse than blatant idolatry. It is taking evil “means” and wrapping them in religious garb, blinding the conscience. The nation’s request is an affront to a holy God and the equivalent to asking for a divorce in their relationship.

So don’t take it personally. Living by faith means that we are not responsible for the choices of others and the consequences that those choices bring. As someone once said, “Poor planning on your part does not make an emergency on my part.”

C. Open their eyes to the consequences

But God then adds that this new arrangement is not yet a done deal. He is not yet on board by any means. Blinded by naïveté, they have no idea of what they are asking for. Therefore Samuel is told to open their eyes by *solemnly warning* (a doubling of the verb “to testify, warn” to make the idea more emphatic) them of the painful consequences this road will bring down upon them. The term “warn” is a legal word that places them under oath and legal obligation for all the consequences of their choice. If they fully understand the consequences of all that will result, God grants them their full dignity as human beings who are free to choose and bear the full responsibility for their choice. This is more dignity than most moderns want to consider.

It’s amazing to see that even in our rebellion, God in his grace does not give up on his people. Eugene Peterson comments, “God descends to our condition, accommodates to our dulled imaginations and little faith, works with us where we are, and changes us from the inside”³ using the consequences of our choices.

What follows is a description of “the *justice* of the king” (vv. 9-20), which ironically turns out to be the “unjust” way worldly kings operate. By means of a clever word play on the term *mishpat* (“justice” or “judge” - the root is used eight times in this chapter I, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 20), the present “injustice” the elders had hoped to address by appointing a “king like all the nations” will instigate an “injustice” that will undo all the freedom that God gave them in the Exodus. And tragically, it will be an “injustice” from which there will be no deliverance.

We will explore “the justice of the king,” or what I call “conforming costs,” next week, but now I want us to consider: “Why can’t be like everyone else?”

V. Let’s Go Sailing for a Lifetime!

When Christ came to earth, he made the same call to his disciples that God did to Abraham, a radical call to leave mother and father, occupation, and all worldly security to come and follow him to a new city whose architect and builder was God. He promised to provide for them, to never leave them nor forsake them. He taught them to pray like Hannah and to trust God for all their needs, knowing that their heavenly Father was generous and already aware of them. His way of faith would lead into a life of adventure, danger, and a wealth of untold relationships that would carry them across the four winds of the known world.

When Peter said to the Lord that they had left everything to follow him, Jesus responded that the loss was nothing compared to the gain:

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Mark 10:29-30)

Yes, sufferings would be theirs in spades, but they need never fear, for even in death he would be with them to grant them life. This is God’s call to every one of us.

The life of faith is large and adventuresome, dangerous and demanding, yet it is so easy to sell out for much less. Like the world around us, we seek security that we can see and manage, reducing our lives to shallow materialism void of vitality and delight. The author of Hebrews commends the faith of the Hebrew Christians in Rome for the price they paid for their initial commitment to follow Christ:

“For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” (Heb 10:34)

Unfortunately, as time passed, many were forsaking their faith and going back to the synagogue for the legal protection that Judaism offered from Roman persecution. But the author of the letter encourages them to return to the illegal house churches no matter what the earthly consequences, for our eternal reward is far better:

“Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (Heb 13:13-14)

Do you trust God with your finances and possessions? Do you pray, “Give us this day our daily bread?” aware that the heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask? When God grants you the ability to make money, what do you do with it? Pay the mortgage, car payment, house repairs, car repairs, insurance, food, school fees for the children, save for vacation, college, retirement, long-term care insurance...set for life?

God asked Israel for the first and best of all they owned in the giving of a tithe (10 per cent). The tithe was then distributed to the Levitical priests, widows, orphans, and the aliens living among them. By giving the first and the best, the people of God demonstrated their complete trust in him by acknowledging that he was the provider of all they owned. In the New Testament, the apostles give similar instructions but no percentage is given. Instead, when collecting for the famine in Judea, Paul gave freedom for each individual to determine the appropriate amount of his or her gift.

A. Giving is thoughtful and proportional

In similar manner, we are to give the first and best to the Lord. Our giving is to be done thoughtfully, proportionate to God's blessing, rather than based on the emotion of the moment:

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. (1 Cor 16:2)

B. The goal of giving to those in need

In the book of Acts, the apostles viewed the famine in Judea as an opportunity to unite the church. Just as the Jews had given their spiritual wealth to the gentiles, now the gentiles had the opportunity to return the gift through their financial gifts. Paul saw his task of collecting for famine relief as the divine way to establish unity and love in the body of Christ:

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack." (2 Cor 8:13-15)

C. We are to give freely, with no coercion

Giving is to be done freely, with no coercion. Our giving is to be motivated by love for God to deepen our trust in him, as he is remaking us in his image:

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." (2 Cor 9:7-9)

D. The ultimate model is Christ himself

The ultimate example for our giving is Christ himself, who emptied himself for the salvation of others:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

Because of this, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Phil 2:9).

When we look at our Lord, flogged beyond human recognition, instead of saying, "We have no king but Caesar," the author of Hebrews says to us,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Heb 12:1-4)

¹ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 112.

² Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 70.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 57.

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