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1 Samuel 8:10-22

Fifteenth Message

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CONFORMING COSTS

SERIES: *THE CROSSING FATES*

Jesus was approaching the end of his ministry. With precious little time remaining, he focused all of his teaching on “the way” of the kingdom to prepare his disciples for what lay ahead in his final pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Along “the way” the two sons of Zebedee came to him and asked:

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking.” (Mark 10:36-38 ESV)

In 1 Samuel 8:1-9 we saw that the elders of Israel asked the prophet to demote himself and appoint a king to judge them like all the other nations. Weary of living by faith, the people were asking, “Why can’t we be like everyone else?” Samuel was so furious he couldn’t speak. He vented his anger to God, and God assured him that this request was not about him; it concerned their rejection of God and was typical of their perpetual addiction to idolatry. God told Samuel to listen to their voice, but first he must solemnly warn them about the ways of the king so that they could make a fully informed decision.

I. The Objects of My Affection (1 Sam 8:10-18)

So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you:” (1 Sam 8:10-11a ESV)

The people are described as those “who were *asking* (the participle of *sha’al*) for a king.” As the story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel make clear, prayer is a very real force to be reckoned with, for it has power to change one’s destiny: “Ask and you will receive.” The tragedy now is that the Israelites are a people who are *asking* for so much less than what the Lord has to offer. Eugene Peterson captures the smallness of their request:

Eve responded to the tempter out of the hope that she would “be like God” (Gen 3:5); the Israelites have no higher ambition than to “be like other nations.” It is not a very lofty goal, particularly when we ponder the rather dreary repetitions of old and banal sins that constitute the histories of the nations. The ambition doesn’t die out; today we call it “peer group” pressure.¹

Before God will allow his people to go down this path they must fully understand the implications of where it will take them. Samuel faithfully carries out his responsibility, declaring all the words of the Lord to the people.

A. Your sons and daughters – *taken!* (vv. 8:11b-13)

“Your sons he will take, and set for himself in his chariots and in his cavalry, and some will run before his chariots. He will set for himself captains of thousands and captains of fifties, to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the implements of his chariots. And your daughters he

will take as perfumers [TNIV] and cooks, and bakers.” (vv. 8:11b-13; Robert Alter’s translation)²

In the third longest of his speeches, Samuel combines prophetic passion with rhetorical skill to bring God’s people to their senses. In the Hebrew text, the *objects* of what the king “takes” are listed first to heighten the pain, like a penetrating punch. The list begins with one’s most precious possessions, sons and daughters, followed by one’s land and the vintage produced thereof, to one’s workforce consisting of servants and cattle. The governing verb that characterizes the king’s ways is “take.” It rings out six times like a fire alarm (vv. 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17), as if “taking” is all the king does. Swirling around this self-centered verb “take” are a myriad of possessive pronouns and suffixes³, making this monarch look more like an egotistical tyrant than a shepherd/king who serves his people.

A family’s most sacred possessions are its sons and daughters. Yet these rank first on the king’s shopping list as prime targets to display his power and might. Sons are conscripted into the military as professional soldiers to serve as officers of every rank in the infantry and cavalry, as well as specialized units to serve as the king’s personal entourage. “The employment of ‘runners’ is a form of vanity particularly associated with young charioteers like Absalom...and Adonijah’ (2 Sam 15:1; 1 Kgs 1:5). One is reminded of Anthony Trollope’s words, ‘When a man has nailed fortune to his chariot-wheels he is apt to travel about in rather a proud fashion.’”⁴ In 1 Sam 22:17, “runners” also refers to bodyguards in the king’s court. I suspect that just, like today, money was no object when it came to their majesty’s secret service.

Because royalty is given to expensive tastes and enormous appetites, even more “sons” are recruited as professional farmers to do the king’s plowing and harvesting throughout the entire agricultural cycle from beginning to end. The remaining sons became professional artisans—ironsmiths, carpenters and wheel makers—serving in factories for the new war machine. “War” brackets the list, making it the inclusio of the king’s pomp and pride.

In such a monarchy daughters too were subject to conscription. They were “taken” to become “perfumers and cooks and bakers,” trained professionals in the art of maintaining the royal court’s high quality of life. As Fokkelman observes, “The three tasks – preparing ointment, cooking, baking—are the first sign of an industrious and energy-consuming court.”⁵ The king and his guests can’t be served muesli for breakfast or a Big Macs for dinner. Every meal must be “Top Chef” quality. These folks don’t shop at Target or Marshalls.

If you value your sons and daughters, the thought of living under a greedy monarch should strike terror into the heart of every parent. Second on the king’s shopping list is your land.

B. Your land—*confiscated!* Your firstfruits—*stolen!* (vv. 14-15)

“And your best fields, and your vineyards and your olive trees he will take and give to his servants. And your seed crops and

your vineyards he will tithe and give to his courtiers and to his servants.” (vv. 14-15)

It takes a lot to underwrite and sustain this multi layered bureaucratic institution. The king has a multitude of ways to feed his rapacious appetites, whether it is taxation, confiscation or the draft, so that there is sacred little outside his reach. Unless you happen to be fortunate enough to belong to his family or many friends that make up the royal court, these cronies and hangers on are the objects of king’s generosity. But of course the “gifts” he “gives” these insiders come from the treasures he has “taken” from everyone else.

After the best and most fertile portions of your land have been confiscated for the “greater good,” you are taxed an additional 10% on the grain and new wine of your harvests. These are also added to the generous pile of gifts given to the king’s in-laws (or are they in fact “outlaws”?) to ensure that their harvests increase at a good rate year after year. The language (“vintage,” “tithe,” Lev 27:30) suggests that which the Lord used to receive as an act of worship as the Giver of life is now “taken” by the king as his “tithe” to his family. Worship is muted of its joy as the huge burden of taxation steamrolls its way across the nation. And it doesn’t end there. Like a huge oversized ocean liner, this new government needs a strong engine to run this top-heavy economy.

C. Your workforce—gone! (vv. 16-17a)

“And your best male and female slaves and your cattle and donkeys he will take and use for his tasks. Your flocks he will tithe.” (16-17a)

After “taking” your children and land, the king’s lustful eye turns its gaze upon your workforce in the fields and in the homes. Without a twitch of conscience he “takes” the very “best” for “his” work. Was there a prize oxen or bull in peak condition on your farm? It is no more. And your faithful servants who had become like your own family are carted away like cattle for they will now be doing the king’s work.

Once the king has taken his full share from the best beasts of burden he condescends to the needs of the state and gives his “tithe” from the smaller cattle, the sheep and goats. We observe that his “generosity” is waning, for the more wealth you have, the more you crave and the less you give. Given our sinful nature, when you make a man a monarch, the enticing power acts like a drug to his ego, so that it isn’t long before everything exists “for him.” What a shocking realization this must have been when the people finally woke up from their illusive dream. Eugene Peterson observes,

When the people demanded a king, what they had in mind was the impressive display of grandeur that would show that they were as important as the neighboring nations and give them a strong central authority that would be able to get rid of the corruption that was so scandalously evident in Samuel’s sons, quickly and efficiently. They wanted a government that had style and clout. What they never considered was that the style and clout would be for the king’s benefit, not theirs.⁶

D. You—slave! (17b)

“and as for you, you will become his slaves.” (v. 17b)

The final nail in the coffin is the emphatic “you!” You yourselves will become slaves! One would think that the mere mention of the word slaves would ignite Israel’s collective memory with horror, just as the term Auschwitz would a Jewish survivor today. Open the door to monarchy and you might as well go back to Egypt. This road

will undo all the wondrous work that God had accomplished in the Exodus.

If all this doesn’t take the nerve out of Israel’s resolve to be “like all the other nations,” Samuel’s final word should scare the sheol right out of them. There is no escape clause. Monarchy is a one-way street that will carry Israel all the way to exile.

E. No escape clause (v. 18)

“Though you will cry out on that day because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.” (v. 18 ESV)

The king’s rapacious appetite will consume, take and tax until you can take it no more and you will scream out to God in your searing pain. Yet, God will not answer. When Israel cried out to God in the face of the Philistine advance in chapter 7, Samuel prayed and God answered. This was the familiar pattern that ignited God’s deliverance in Egypt (Exod 2:23-25) and sustained Israel in the land for four centuries. Now Israel cries out to be delivered from the “king whom they have chosen for themselves.”

But she is warned that if she installs a king to do for her what God had covenanted to do for her, she is slamming the door on her relationship to God. Monarchy is a marriage to another lover. It substitutes one’s trust and devotion to God for trust in human power, breaking all the bonds of covenantal relationship. You don’t pray for deliverance, you pay for it. And when the battle is done there is no amazement, no awe or songs of jubilation, just more taxes to pay. As Eugene Peterson observes,

A free life of faith, lived in the vast and gracious mysteries of God, is a large, demanding life—it is far easier to live small, reduced to the visible and tangible requirements of petty gods and tyrant kings... When people transfer their expectations for righteousness and salvation from God to government, they are sure to be disappointed.⁷

II. A Fully Informed Decision? (1 Sam 8:19-20)

But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” (vv. 19-20)

No! The response could not be more emphatic. Samuel’s vigorous protest and grave warnings are simply brushed aside as if he were a bothersome fly that had landed in their soup. There is no serious dialogue, reflection or prayer, no pondering the implications of what this means to their relationship with God. Instead they become more forceful and boldly insist on having their own way. It makes you wonder if they had heard even a word that Samuel had spoken. Or were their minds bent on divorce before the court had even convened?

Their final words are telling. They want a king to “go out before us and fight our battles.” The lure of the world’s prestige and power has gotten under their skin. Like a deadly virus it had blinded them from being able to see anything else. This is what being enamored with the world does to us. It so fixates us on its deceptive pleasures and empty promises that we become blind to eternal values and deaf to God’s word. And in that darkened state our resolve can be strengthened to sacrifice everything for the devil’s stale fruit. Such resolve will find its climax in John’s gospel, when Pilate asks the Jews, “Shall I crucify

your king?" and the chief priests respond with that blood-curdling answer, "We have no king but Caesar!" (John 19:15).

III. Divine Concession (1 Sam 8:21-22)

And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, "Obey their voice and make them a king." Samuel then said to the men of Israel, "Go every man to his city." (vv. 21-22)

Dejected and forlorn, our ambassador returns home with the detailed report of his failed negotiations. What wrath does he expect to hear from a holy God whose covenant of faith and love has been traded in for a house on Pennsylvania Avenue? Yet the Lord's response is remarkable. With no anger or heated emotion, he merely says five words (in Hebrew) to Samuel, "Listen/to their voice/ and king / them/ a king." Brueggemann captures the resigned pathos of the moment:

How remarkable that Yahweh concedes everything, does not resist, does not argue, does not rage, does not retaliate. There is for Yahweh, as for Samuel, a wistfulness and deep sadness. Something precious is being forfeited in Israel, and Israel seems not even to notice.⁸

Samuel's abrupt dismissal closes out the scene with ambiguity. Was he so distraught by what God asked him to do that he needed more time before he could carry out the order, or was he merely waiting for a word from God as to "when" and "who" he would appoint? For a text that is taut with tension, there is surprisingly little resolve by the chapter's end. Has God given up on his wayward children, so much so that they are in the driver's seat, steering their course for the rest of history? Does this mark the beginning of the end of Israel's theocracy?

IV. Israel's Kings and the Servant-King

A. Israel's kings

Though God reluctantly and with great pathos gives his people what they want, he does not let go of the sovereign reins of their history. By granting their request in Saul, Israel was to learn by the hard road of experience what it is like to be ruled by a "king like all the nations." Saul, the peoples' choice, was a man whose pride matched his soaring height. He was an ardent materialist with little interest in God and absolutely no spiritual perception. Initially he lacked courage and the chutzpah needed for leadership, but after he was elevated as king, he quickly became an egomaniac, using and abusing everyone in his charge.

Yet, as Israel was suffering under this sadistic tyrant, God was already at work shaping a new king "after his own heart." By God's grace, a remnant of his people found this shepherd/king in the wilderness. David's greatest gift to mankind was not his victories in war or his capture of Jerusalem, it was his psalms, seventy-three poems to teach God's people how to reign in life through prayer.

Reading Psalm 17 this week, I came across a profound petition. Deceitful and powerful enemies, tracking David like a pack of hungry lions, surround and are ready to pounce on their victim. Outmanned and outgunned, David prays for God's vindication and deliverance. But he wants more. He is bold enough to ask for God to "make a miraculous display of your loyal-love" (v. 7a). For David, the experience of God's saving love swallowed up all other loves and became his life's "one" obsession (Ps 27:4).

The lesson, however, was woefully short-lived, as few kings followed David's ideal. The drug of concentrated power was too powerful to resist. Things went from bad to worse: from Solomon who, in his lust for opulence spent thirteen years building his own house, to Manasseh, who brought every form of idolatry into the temple and even burned his sons as an offering to a pagan deity. It's no wonder that the prophets condemned this rebellious nation as blind and deaf. But a day was coming on the other side of the exile when the deaf would hear and the blind see.

B. The Servant-King in the Gospel of Mark

When Jesus is presented in the gospel of Mark, he hears his Father's voice from heaven declaring who he is: "You are my son, the beloved one, in whom I am well pleased" (1:11). The voice quotes two significant Hebrew texts, with a possible allusion to a third. "You are my son" comes from Psalm 2:7, the psalm that was used as the coronation song for kings in Israel. That is the first secret of the kingdom: Jesus is the King (King = Messiah).

But how will this king bring his rule over the whole earth? The second text, "in whom I am well pleased," comes from Isaiah 42:1, the first of four songs about Israel's "Suffering Servant": a servant who will not cry out or raise his voice in the street; a servant who will be a man of sorrows acquainted with grief; a servant pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa 53:4-5). This is the second secret about the kingdom: The king must die! A further allusion to his death comes from the term "beloved," a word taken from Genesis 22:2 evoking the painful memory of Abraham on the occasion when he was commanded by God, "Take now your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you" (Gen 22:2).

The gospel traces the story of how God's voice in heaven is proclaimed on earth. It takes eight chapters in the gospel of Mark for the disciples to grasp the first secret of the kingdom. Out of their blindness they come to the realization that Jesus is the Messiah. But Jesus strictly warns them to tell no one. Though they understood the first secret of the kingdom, that Jesus was king, they did not have a clue about the second: the king must die. From that moment on, Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). But such "a way" of being "king" was difficult for the disciples to comprehend, let alone accept.

It was along "the way" that the two sons of Zebedee asked him that question.

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." (Mark 10:36-40 ESV)

James and John have no clue on the "way" of the kingdom. So a little lesson is in store:

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

These verses became one of Ray Stedman’s signature texts regarding a pastor’s authority. He boldly challenged the prevailing structures in the modern church, stating that, “If the Protestant Reformation ousted the Pope’s authority in the worldwide church, today we have placed a pope in every church.” I can testify as one of his sons that he treated us younger pastors with the respect of a brother, never lording it over us.

This text also speaks volumes as to the meaning of “headship” in the home. What does it really mean for the husband to be head of his wife? For many it means control, but in God’s kingdom it means sacrificial service. I’ve often wondered if the analogy of Christ cleansing his bride, the church, “by the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5:26) was a reference to Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. Such humility and service ought to characterize a husband’s love for his wife and children. But why is it so difficult for us to comprehend?

After centuries of blindness, the lesson didn’t sink in for the disciples. Finally, as they are leaving Jericho, they encounter a blind beggar. When the man heard that Jesus was near, he cried to out to him, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Though rebuked by the crowd, the beggar persisted in his pleas for mercy to this royal Son. Jesus called him, and when he sprang to his feet and came to him, Jesus said to him,

“What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man said to him, “**Rabbi, let me recover my sight.**” And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:51-52)

It takes a miracle of God to open our blind eyes to see that Jesus is the Messiah. But it takes another miracle for us “to see” that what it means to follow in “the way” of our King is to become a servant of all and suffer for all. To “see” life in this way is truly the grace of God at work.

I have a friend who used to work in the high tech industry. Several years ago, during the Christmas holidays he traveled to Taiwan to negotiate a large proposal for his company. The team worked feverishly for days and with great effort completed their task on Christmas Eve. Though exhausted, they retired to their hotel with elation. Late that night he received a phone call telling him that someone had broken into their offices and stolen all their computers. My friend regrouped his team, went back to work, and on borrowed equipment they miraculously reconstructed the intricate proposal from memory just before the deadline on New Year’s Day. The proposal was accepted and the team returned home to their families victorious.

After returning home, my friend opened his local paper and came across a page of poems written by school children. One began, “Daddy, why did you have to be gone at Christmas...it wasn’t the same without you...” On and on he read of a little girl’s broken heart, longing for her father. The last line broke his heart, “But daddy, I’ll always love you.” When he looked at the name of the poet, he discovered it was his daughter. Typical of our valley, the head of the home was seldom home. The poem shot through him and broke down all his defenses. Convicted about the importance of serving his family, he walked away from his company, the promise of stock options and a generous salary, and took a teaching job at a fraction of the pay. Today he has no regrets, and rejoices over his relationship with his daughter.

May God restore our sight!

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

2 I’ve used Robert Alter’s translation in vv. 11b-17 that the English reader might feel the cadence and punch of the original Hebrew. Robert Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 42-45.

3 Bergen notes that “fourteen of eighty-five words, or one word in every six in the speech, had a suffix referring to the king.” Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 117, n. 9.

4 Robert P. Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 110-111 quoted in Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 74-75.

5 J. P. Fokkerman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 4 vols. (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 350.

6 Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 56.

7 Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 56

8 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 68.

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