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1 Samuel 9:26-10:16

Seventeenth Message

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SIGNS OF SONSHIP

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

What are your aspirations? What things really concern you? If you could ask God to do anything for you, what would it be? How do you want to live the rest of your life? Do you feel you have a calling, something that drives you deep inside, or a quest that ignites you, fulfills you and keeps you alive even through the darkest hours? Or has your ability to dream died?

Over three thousand years ago, an attractive young man named Saul lived in the hilltop town of Gibeah in Benjamin. The place had a painful history of vile sin and gang rape that set off a senseless civil war, bringing the tribe almost to extinction. The ghastly events done in the name of religion ravaged the faith of the tiny remnant that remained. But Saul's family survived. Through hard work and determination they developed a thriving donkey business, and his father Kish became a prominent member of the community.

Saul was in the prime of life, content and financially secure, working in the family business. His attractive personality and tall stature made him the object of affection of all Gibeah's townsfolk, especially the young female population. Like most in his village he had no religious affections, let alone aspirations. Then one day his father's donkeys got lost, and Kish sent his son on a search. Like most of us, Saul had no idea that he was the one who was lost and the one whom God was seeking. At the climax of his search he finds that he is the one who has been found, as Samuel invites him to a banquet in his honor. At this critical juncture in the story, Samuel unveils the secrets concerning the destiny God has for him.

Saul's story of "seek and find" is illustrative of our search for significance and how God often uses our "lost donkeys" to find us in our lost state, and once found, he invites us to reign as co-regents with him in his kingdom.

I. Saul is Privately Anointed (1 Sam 9:26-10:1)

A. The secret conversation (vv. 26-27)

And when they came down from the high place into the city, a bed was spread for Saul on the roof, and he lay down to sleep. [or "Samuel talked with Saul on the roof of his house" TNIV]. Then at the break of dawn Samuel called to Saul on the roof, "Up, that I may send you on your way." So Saul arose, and both he and Samuel went out into the street. As they were going down to the outskirts of the city, Samuel said to Saul, "Tell the servant to pass on before us, and when he has passed on, stop here yourself for a while, that I may make known to you the word of God." (1 Sam 9:26-27 ESV)

After Samuel had played the role of generous host to Saul at a liturgical meal in front of thirty guests, he invites him to spend the night in the seclusion of his home. Escorting Saul to a secluded spot on the roof, the two men have a private conversation under the night sky. We are not privy to what was said, but the change in locale from the public to the private sphere depicts the intimacy of a new father directing the affairs of his son. I wonder how Saul slept that night in view of the events that had occurred that day.

At the break of dawn, Saul's new life begins. With imperatives similar to Kish's at the beginning of the chapter, Samuel bids his new "son" to get up that he may "send" him on his way. Samuel makes preparations for their journey home. Ever the good host, he escorts his two guests out of his home to the edge of town. But when they get there, Samuel asks Saul to send his competent servant on ahead of them, "that I may make known to you the word of God." Waltke comments: "Saul must enter the divine realm and the

new era without attachment to his father's house. His new support is *I AM* and his prophet."¹ Jesus made a similar call to his disciples:

Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him (Mark 1:20).

What follows is the longest of Samuel's speeches to an individual.

B. The secret anointing (10:1)

Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him and said, "Has not the LORD anointed you to be prince over his people Israel? And you shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their surrounding enemies. And this shall be the sign to you that the LORD has anointed you to be prince over his heritage."

Before Samuel even says a word he takes a flask of oil and empties the contents over Saul's head. Fokkelman explains that his earlier position of "guest of honor is now increased by the fresh attention to his head, to the honor of Saul. The oil lends even more significance to the fact that he already stood head and shoulders above everyone else: he is consecrated therein from now on."² To anoint (lit. "smear") a person or object with oil meant that he or it was being set aside as God's sacred property (Lev 8:10-11, 30). Both prophets and priests were thus anointed, and Israel's kings will be no exception. The term "anointed one" ("messiah") would eventually signify Israel's future messiah, which was translated into Greek as "Christ" (Isa 61:1-3; Luke 4:17-21). Having anointed Saul, Samuel then kisses him, an act of respect, recognizing him as the new ruler (Ps 2:11-12).

As Saul stood drenched in oil from head to shoulders, any hopes he may have entertained of getting out of Dodge unscathed, away from this "religious fanatic," are dashed. The Lord God has just laid claim to Kish's son: "Is it not because the Lord has anointed you over his inheritance to be leader (*nagid* – "leader, king-designate")?"

With no interest, passion or training, Saul is instantly raised to the status of the Lord's vice-regent to rule over his inheritance. But God never calls a leader to a task without adequately equipping him with the faith and resources to accomplish what he had asked him to do. And when you consider the ragtag, depraved cast of characters God often has to draw from, I'm not sure any of us would want his coaching job. Consider how God was able to foster faith and courage in a gutless Gideon, or teach a lust-driven Samson how to pray in his blindness. God always condescends to work with us where we are.

II. Three Signs of a New Identity (1 Sam 10:2-6)

Therefore, upon his departure, Saul receives three mysterious signs, which, Eugene Peterson explains, are designed to prepare him with "an internal identity as the one in whom God is exercising rule. If kingship is going to be more than a role, hung on Saul like a suit of ill-fitting clothes, he needs confirmation that there is more to this than Samuel's action, more in it than Samuel's bright idea."³ These signs work on several levels, authenticating Samuel's authority as a prophet par excellence. On one level, they replay conversations and incidents that occurred during Saul's search for the lost donkeys; on a second level, they reiterate Samuel's actions toward Saul; and finally, they become prophetic of Saul's calling and destiny. With each new sign, Saul experiences the veracity of the servant's words, "all that he says comes true" (9:6) with increasing intensity until he is ultimately

overwhelmed by God's Spirit. If all this doesn't elicit faith in the agnostic son, nothing will.

On still another level, these signs become typological of Christ's call and baptism, and by extension, our new identity and call to reign with him.

A. The First Sign: A son leaving his father (v. 2)

When you depart from me today, you will meet (lit. "find") two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of (lit. "border of") Benjamin at Zelzah, and they will say to you, "The donkeys that you went to seek are found, and now your father has ceased to care about the donkeys and is anxious about you, saying, "What shall I do about my son?"

Samuel speaks with an authority that is palpable. It is as if from "today" onward, every aspect of Saul's life will be orchestrated by the prophet's words. His life is no longer his own; he now lives in a new realm. Note that in this new realm Saul is no longer "seeking" in order to "find;" instead he "finds" things coming to him, things for which he wasn't even "seeking."

In the first sign, Saul will "find" two men by Rachel's tomb, who confirm Samuel's words that the donkeys he was seeking had been found. The sign is designed to make Saul realize that his search was a ploy by the Lord to lead him to the prophet, to be anointed as Israel's king. The fact that the donkeys were found without his help suggests that Saul is being set free from the economic and earthly concerns that occupy families in order to focus on matters that are infinitely more significant—those of the kingdom.

While that freedom may be liberating to the son, it has the opposite effect on the father. The fact that this encounter occurs by Rachel's tomb, on the "border" of Benjamin, is frightfully ominous: it reminds us that Rachel died giving birth to her son Benjamin. The site where Rachel lost contact with her son is now where Kish, another Benjaminite, will lose all contact with his son. We can't help but cringe, hearing the father's agonizing cry, "What shall I do about my son?" Fokkelman calls Saul's journey home "a border-transcending experience with the dynamics, hidden as yet, of life and death. He puts off the old Adam and becomes a new person."⁴

Like Saul, our true identity is not found in our family of origin. Jesus called his followers to make a radical break from family, refusing to take new recruits from those who would not give his lordship primary authority in their lives:

To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:59-60)

The apostle Paul gave a similar word to his disciple Timothy:

No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier (2 Tim 2:4 NASB).

As Christians we are called to "honor" our parents, but we are not to live our lives in order to "please" them.

B. The Second Sign: Heavenly food and fellowship (vv. 3-4)

"Then you shall go on from there farther and come to the oak of Tabor. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet (lit. "find") you there, one carrying three young goats, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine. And they will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you shall accept ("take") from their hand. (vv. 3-4)

After the first encounter, Saul will journey on to the oak of Tabor, where he will be "found" by three men making a pilgrimage to worship God in Bethel. Trees often served as landmarks and sacred sites. The three men will "ask" (*sha'ul*) about his "welfare" (*shalom*), in language that replays the familiar echo of Saul's name (*sha'ul*), which as we have heard, contained the village names of Shalishah and Shaalim, during his futile search for the donkeys.

After their gracious inquiry as to Saul's well being (which has now taken on a whole *new* dimension), the men will give him two of the three loaves of bread that were originally intended for God. The gift of sacrificial bread harkens back to Samuel's sacrificial feast, as well as Saul's earlier concern that

he had no bread to give to the prophet (9:7). The sign gives confirmation that in this new realm he is recognized as the Lord's anointed and given homage and honor. For the one who had no bread, bread is given freely and in abundance. The scene ends with the harmonious image of "giving and receiving."

This sign is an apt description of the heavenly food and new relationships we experience in the kingdom of God. Jesus spent a great deal of energy teaching his disciples this new way of living. As the new Moses, he proclaimed that he was the true bread that "comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33), and "whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst" (John 6:35). In two feeding miracles the disciples discovered that this bread is pure gift, and more than abundant, for after they had served others there was more than ample bread leftover to feed them. This lesson is vital in establishing our identity in Christ. You will never have a strong sense of God's love and calling until you first "leave your mother and father" and then go out into a wilderness, trusting God alone to feed you. Then when your soul is sated with the richest of foods, like David you will sing, "Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live" (Ps 63:3, 4a).

And just as the pilgrims to Bethel recognized Saul, not for his tall stature but because of the gift of the Spirit, so it is in Christ's new family. When an individual accepts Christ as Lord, he or she is immediately baptized by the Spirit and endowed with one or more spiritual gifts to impart the life of Christ to all they come in contact with. This divine enablement has nothing to do with our personality or family background. Like the heavenly bread, they are pure gifts of grace and, contrary to our families of origin, there is no competition or hierarchical control, for in this family each one makes a unique contribution, while at the same time being mutually dependent on one another.

C. The Third Sign: The hill of God...Philistine garrison...Spirit of the Lord (vv. 5-6)

"After that you shall come to Gibeath-elohim, where there is a garrison of the Philistines. And there, as soon as you come to the city, you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying. Then the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man. (vv. 5-6)

With each new sign, Saul is confronted with an escalating number of individuals, intensifying the force and impact of the signs. First he meets two men, then three. Now in the third encounter he is confronted with an entire band of prophets (who are in fact a holy "band"). This climactic encounter takes place at Gibeath-elohim ("the hill of God"), which could be another name for his home town, "Gibeah of Saul":

Its location and panoramic view (it rises about 30 m. above the surrounding plain; 862 m. above sea level) have made it an important strategic site... On a clear day, from the top of the mound, the Dead Sea is visible to the southeast...and there is a commanding view of Jerusalem sprawled over the hills to the south.⁵ "The commanding view from the hill's great height is suggestive of Saul's new perspective after he is seized and overtaken by the Spirit of the Lord working through this band of prophets. After their initial search to find the donkeys had failed, the servant suggested that they should seek help from "the man of God."

Knowing they were out of money and food, Saul responded with *mah nabi* ("what shall we bring?"), which can also be read, "What is a prophet?" At that juncture the narrator pauses the story line to give a clarification about the history of the term. Now on his journey home, Saul gets a full dose of reality of the numinous power of the prophet.

When Saul encounters a band of prophets making music with their strings, pipes and tambourines, the centripetal force of God's Spirit will "rush" upon him with tornado-like force, hauling him into the center of the prophetic realm. Being subjected to these powerful and irresistible forces, Saul will be "changed" (*haphak*) into another man. The verb describes powerful and often violent forces that overthrow or radically alter the condition of nature or individuals. To say that he was "shaken" would be an under-

statement; that his psyche was turned “upside down” or “inside out” would be more appropriate.

The language is similar to the time God’s Spirit “rushed” upon Samson with explosive strength in order to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines (Judg 13:5; 14:6, 19; 15:14). This explains why mention is made of the threatening presence of a Philistine outpost, for it reminds us of Saul’s calling as Israel’s deliverer. But by placing the enemy threat front and center within this, Saul’s climactic encounter with a band of “*prophets*” (the term is found 7 times in our text) is telling us that Israel’s king is not to depend on conventional weapons for deliverance “like all the other nations,” but he is to put his complete trust on God’s Spirit. The gripping Spirit confirms and seals Samuel’s symbolic act of anointing with oil.

Following the three signs and the seizure by God’s Spirit, Saul is given detailed instructions and directives for what he is to do.

III. Free to Do, or Do to be Free? (1 Sam 10:7-8)

“Now when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you. Then go down before me to Gilgal. And behold, I am coming to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do.” (vv. 7-8)

Saul is first told that after all these signs are fulfilled (lit. “come to you”), he is to “do” whatever his hand “finds” [to do], because God will be with him. The promise that “God is with you” is not just a generic promise that God’s presence will accompany him. “I am with you” is God’s promise of his omnipotent power, most often given to leaders when the task before them seems insurmountable. The promise makes available the host of God’s armies to his servants and is his guarantee of success. With that thought in mind, Saul is encouraged not to fear the Philistine war machine but to step out by faith, engaging them with whatever he finds “at hand,” knowing he can count on God’s omnipotent power for victory.

But if Saul thinks such freedom is a blank check, he is mistaken. Samuel adds a severe qualifier in the next verse: “Wait, until I come and make known to you what you shall do.” The paradoxical tension found in these two verses has troubled many commentators. How does one freely “do” whatever the occasion requires, while at the same time “wait” to be told what to “do”?

Samuel’s second word places the king in absolute subjection to the prophet, who in turn represents God’s word on earth. Samuel’s “wait until I come” should provoke Saul’s memory of the choir of young maidens who enthusiastically informed him that he had arrived at just the right time to meet the prophet, who was in town for the sacrificial meal. They urged him not to delay but hurry to the feast and he would find the prophet, “for the people will not eat till he comes, since he must bless the sacrifice; afterward those who are invited will eat” (9:13). That event was the dress rehearsal for how Israel’s king is to engage in battle. Just as the people would not eat until the prophet blessed the sacrifice, so Saul must not engage in holy war until Samuel comes to Gilgal to lead the people in worship. Holy war will never be effective without the king and people in right relationship to the Lord.

This of course is where Saul will have difficulty. Overcome by fear, he will not have enough faith to wait for Samuel to conduct the sacrifice and will take matters into his own “hands.” But God will not be manipulated. Without the Spirit of God, it doesn’t matter how great are your army or weapons; they will fail you. How often we see Saul’s hand on his spear fail to hit his target, while David’s hand on the harp overpowers evil spirits. The only occasion when Saul’s weapon is effective in his hand is when he falls on his own sword. The tragedy of his misdirected trust is immortalized in the climactic refrain of David’s lament:

**“How the mighty have fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!”** (2 Sam 1:27)

But when you are in a right relationship with the Lord, you can take whatever you “find” in your “hand” to engage in battle, even a sling and a stone, and you can be confident of victory. In the days of Judges, Barak routed the mighty general Sisera, who commanded a massive force of 900

chariots from Hazor. The general fled the campaign on foot and sought refuge in the home of a certain Kenite named Heber, who had made an alliance with his king. Unfortunately for Sisera, the man of the house was not at home. Instead, Sisera is welcomed by the man’s wife, Jael, who refused to compromise her trust in Israel’s God. As a woman who lives by faith, she takes whatever “her hand finds” to kill the general. In her case all she needed was a princely bowl of warm milk to put Sisera to sleep, and then a tent peg and mallet to finish him off. Her faith is immortalized in poetry (Judg 5:24-27).

IV. When the Son Comes Home (1 Sam 10:9-16)

A. The public reception: Disdain (vv. 9-12)

When he turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart. And all these signs came to pass that day. When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them. And when all who knew him previously saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, “What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?” And a man of the place answered, “And who is their father?” Therefore it became a proverb, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (vv. 9-12)

As Saul returns home, the narrator goes to great length to emphasize how Samuel’s words were fulfilled to the letter. First we are given the summary report of the signs, along with the fact that Saul’s heart was changed the moment he “turned his back” to leave. Second, special emphasis is given to the third sign, as Saul is ambushed by the Spirit and begins prophesying. The repetition allows us a second experience of its surprising power, this time as if we were eyewitnesses to the event. Finally, we are privy to the Gibeah nightly news, where we hear not one or two, but three reports from the bewildered citizens of Gibeah as they try and make sense over what happened to Kish’s son.

The events of that day did not go down well among Gibeah’s citizens. Fokkelman reasons that, “In the eyes of the well-established citizens these ecstasies probably lead a life on the fringe, and their origins are no longer clear now that they live outside the context of the family.”⁶ Their alarm is confirmed when one of them asks, “Who is their father?” The question is more of a put-down than an inquiry. The truth is that these prophets claim to be subject to the Spirit of God, which means they operate outside traditional lines of authority. “And we know who their father is...it’s that religious fanatic Samuel.”

As the news of Saul’s radical conversion spreads like wildfire from eyewitnesses to the general public, the town’s amazement and shock is etched in proverbial stone. The news is as public, as public as it can be.

B. The private reception: No one knows (vv. 13-16)

When he had finished prophesying, he came to the high place. Saul’s uncle said to him and to his servant, “Where did you go?” And he said, “To seek the donkeys. And when we saw they were not to be found, we went to Samuel.” And Saul’s uncle said, “Please tell me what Samuel said to you.” And Saul said to his uncle, “He told us plainly that the donkeys had been found.” But about the matter of the kingdom, of which Samuel had spoken, he did not tell him anything. (vv. 13-16)

When Saul arrives home, he is received, surprisingly, not by his father but his uncle. The disappearance of Kish emphasizes the fact that Saul answers to another father. Saul’s uncle is Ner, the father of Abner, who became Saul’s powerful and ambitious military commander. When Saul’s curious uncle probes his nephew for the details of his journey, he is as forthcoming as a teenager who spent the night carousing at a wild party. Though Saul doesn’t technically lie, he deliberately keeps his uncle in the dark regarding what the prophet revealed about “his way.” In fact, he places such force on the prophet’s voice regarding the donkeys that he prevents any further probing. We are left to speculate if Saul’s secrecy was due to Samuel’s instructions or his own reluctance and refusal to accept his new calling.

These incredible signs, along with the liturgical meal prepared beforehand, should have overwhelmed Saul with assurance of his calling and enablement for his new destiny.

V. Our Calling and Identity as “Sons”

A. Called to resist family pressure

Like Saul, all of us must go through a similar initiation rite to renounce “mother and father” in order to become “sons” of another Father. The rite of baptism symbolizes the complete death of our old life and our being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life. Like Jesus, the news of such a radical change of allegiance may not go down well in our home town; we may face stiff resistance or painful persecution.

Early in Jesus’ ministry, his family thought things were getting way out of hand. Thinking their son had lost his senses, they came to Capernaum to retrieve him and put him back in his proper place within the family. When they arrived at Peter’s home, which was congested with people, they sent word to Jesus that they were standing outside. But Jesus refused to go back under their authority. In the process he redefined the family as “whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). This radical reordering of Israel and the family around himself takes precedence over the old family and national structures, for the bonds created by his Spirit are stronger than blood.

Have you spiritually left home and resisted family pressure to return?

B. Called not to compete, compare or conform

Paul exhorts us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). He goes on to explain how the renewal of our minds radically transforms our view of ourselves. No longer must we compete against or compare our work with others to attain approval for who we are. Instead we are given gifts of grace to make a unique contribution in the symphony of love. The joy of being part of this society is that we are free to specialize, to do “little” but do it well. The love that is released in the exercise of our gifts keeps the flame of our passion burning bright throughout a lifetime.

Today, our children confront an education system that is destructive to their souls. Unfortunately, many of us have bought into it. When I went to school, I had a good aptitude in math, but found English and literature very difficult, scoring 470 out of 800 on my SAT test. Yet in those days one did not have to be perfect across the board to get an education, so I was able to go to college to get a degree in economics. But to my surprise, God gave me spiritual gifts that ignited my love for languages and poetry and fueled my passion for teaching. And that passion has not waned in four decades.

But now our children are brought up to believe they have to be perfect across the board to qualify for an education. They aren’t allowed to be unique or specialize, and failure isn’t an option. I have a Chinese friend who defines the Asian grading system as: A = average; B = bad; C = catastrophe; and D = “disowned!” As these impossible standards are hammered into our youth, many actually achieve “perfection” and, to their parents’ satisfaction, are accepted to the universities of their choice. But there is a price. Their A+ performances look like animated manikins, void of life. Perfection strips the soul of passion. Worse yet, it leaves them with no sense of identity. This may explain why not a few have chosen to take their lives.

Do not allow the world to press you or your children into its mold. We follow a king whose “yoke is easy and his burden light.”

C. Called to wage a heavenly war

Saul was anointed as king for one great task: to deliver his people from their enemies. It was for this reason that Jesus came to deliver his people from the grip of Satan and the power of sin. Today, the church is to be the salt and light of the world. You can’t turn to any other institution to tackle the problem of evil. No education or government program can get to the heart of it. So we cannot escape our responsibility to engage the world forces of darkness. But, as this text reminds us, we can’t do this in our own strength; dependence upon God is vital. The weapons we have at our disposal are divinely powerful for the pulling down of strongholds of evil, but they are of no value if we are not in a proper relationship with God. So after you have put on all your heavenly armor, you must “wait” on God, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Eph 6:18). Then do whatever your hands find to do and God will grant you victory.

In the aftermath of victory we will affirm, with David,

**What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet. (Ps 8:4-6)**

1 Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 634.

2 J. P. Fokkelman, *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), 414.

3 Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 64.

4 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 418.

5 David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 285-286.

6 Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 429.

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