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1 Samuel 10:17-11:13

Eighteenth Message

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CAN THIS ONE SAVE US?

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Our text from 1 Samuel gives helpful insights in addressing one of the most difficult tensions in the Christian life. I call this tension, “caught between two worlds”—the ideal and the real. The Bible feeds our imaginations with the ways of the kingdom of God and how our lives “ought” to be holy. We acquire heavenly aspirations of creating love-filled homes, pursuing significant careers and becoming an influential witness. Then one day we wake up to the hard reality that the environment we live in or work in is not conducive to our faith. Every one of us lives under the authority of others whose leadership creates the atmospheric environment in which we breathe and function. It may come as a shock to you, but there are no perfect governments, or companies, or schools, or homes, or churches, or ministries, or missions. More often than not, those in authority over us make choices or create policies that are not faith based but are driven by fear, or self-interest, or greed. So how do we live by faith when we are “caught between two worlds”? Do we live in denial? Do we trash our dreams of the kingdom? Do we submit in silence and lose our voice? Do we quit and run? Do we become cynical complainers? Do we subvert and undermine the powers that be? Is there ever a proper time to revolt?

In our text we will discover how God works with a leader who has no interest in the kingdom, a people who are faithless, and skeptics who live to subvert all that is good. These are what you might call less than ideal conditions, yet Samuel is the perfect model of a living faith caught between two worlds.

I. The Pride of Benjamin (1 Sam 10:17-27)

A. Sealing a sinful choice (10:17-19)

Now Samuel called the people together to the LORD at Mizpah. And he said to the people of Israel, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.’ But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses, and you have said to him, ‘Set a king over us.’ Now therefore present yourselves before the LORD by your tribes and by your thousands.” (1 Sam 10:17-19 ESV)

To complete the process of Saul’s coronation as Israel’s first king, Samuel “called” (more accurately, “Samuel caused the people ‘to cry out in distress’ for help from the Lord.”¹) all the people to Mizpah, the site where he had earlier led them in repentance (7:5-6). Prior to the long awaited announcement of God’s choice, Samuel preaches a short but profoundly poignant sermon exposing the evil of their hearts in seeking “a king like all the other nations have.” The opening words, “Thus says the LORD,” introduce a divine oracle that presents the Lord himself as witness against his people. Samuel summarizes four centuries of their covenantal relationship, in two propositions: God has been ever faithful to deliver his people from all their oppressors; Israel, on the other hand, has been continually unappreciative and faithless. Given God’s impeccable record, Israel’s request for a king is like a slap in the face, culminating centuries of rejection. But because of their insistence, God will let them have their way.

B. God’s choice (10:20-22)

Then Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, and the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. He brought the tribe of Benjamin near by its clans, and the clan of the Matrites was taken by lot; and Saul the son of Kish was taken by lot. But when they sought him, he could not be found. So they inquired again of the LORD, “Is there a man still to come?” and the LORD said, “Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage.” (vv. 20-22)

Samuel had instructed Saul that once the Spirit came mightily upon him he was to “do what his hand finds to do, for the Lord is with you” (10:7). This suggests that as king he was to initiate conflict with the Philistine garrison in Gibeah (10:5). Once the conflict was under way he was to wait for Samuel in Gilgal to receive explicit instructions on how to engage in holy war. Saul’s ability to deliver his people from their enemies would demonstrate to the nation that he was indeed Israel’s anointed. But Saul is very resistant to God’s calling. If he won’t even speak about it with his family, how can we expect him to initiate holy war? Samuel is therefore forced to flush this reluctant leader out of hiding by a national ballot at Mizpah.

Lots are taken to determine first, which tribe, then family, and finally, the individual whom God has selected as king. The tribal lot falls first to Benjamin, then to the Matrite clan, and finally to Saul, the son of Kish. The search goes out, but like Kish’s errant donkeys, his son cannot be “found.” He has successfully hidden himself in the midst of the baggage—not a very promising note for Israel’s new commander-in-chief. When their search comes up empty, the people are forced to seek divine aid to find the one who is lost. The repetitive irony should not be lost on us. Eugene Peterson observes:

...though the people reject God, God doesn’t reject them. He stays with them through the entire process, using the prophet Samuel both to interpret and carry out the action. Even though their agenda excludes God, God is silently, hiddenly there, sovereign in their agenda. It is not that easy to get rid of God...They are now forced to pray to God to help them find the king that they have just chosen with God’s help, but against God’s will (v. 22). God graciously condescends to do for them what they cannot do for themselves.²

C. The people’s choice (10:23-24)

Then they ran and took him from there. And when he stood among the people, he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward. And Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen? There is none like him among all the people.” And all the people shouted, “Long live the king!” (vv. 23-24)

The game of “hide and seek” continues as God graciously reveals Saul’s whereabouts to his people. He’s hiding in the baggage. Like children who have just spied their playmate’s hiding place, they “run” to “find” their king. What a contrast with Jesse’s youngest son, David. Following his anointing, he leaves the “baggage” with the baggage keeper and courageously “runs” to Israel’s battle lines to confront the tyrannical bully Goliath. This is what kings do for their people. In the same way, immediately after Jesus was anointed with the Spirit at his baptism, the

Spirit drove him into the wilderness to do battle with Satan (Luke 4:1-2).

Saul's passivity is shameful. His subjects have to extract him from where he is, then practically carry him back to Mizpah, and like a crane hoisting a huge statue, stand him erect in his new place. When their statue is finally set in place, the people are overcome by his towering height. Samuel tells them, "Take a good look at the one whom the LORD has chosen. There is no one like him in the whole country!" Yes, the Lord has chosen Saul ("asked"), but the narrator does not allow us to forget that he was selected because monarchy was the people's choice ("people" rings out five times in one verse). Yet all of that is quickly forgotten when the people see Saul's commanding presence and surpassing height. Seized with amazement, they let out a ringing cry, as if they had just won the lottery: "Long live the king!" I doubt Samuel was as jubilant as Israel's cheerleaders, for in the next verses he rains on their parade.

D. Protection from the people's choice (10:25a)

Then Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the LORD. (v. 25a)

In chapter 8 Samuel explained to Israel that if they wanted a king like all the nations have, they needed to fully understand the way worldly kings operate. Kings are "takers" not "givers" and, if left unchecked, their greed would ultimately lead the nation back to slavery. To protect them from such abuse, Samuel sets forth regulations governing kingship. After he explains these to the people, he writes them down and deposits them as the official constitution in the sanctuary of the Lord.

Though the actual stipulations are withheld from us, the spirit of them is revealed in Samuel's fiery exhortations in chapter 12. It's likely they were similar to the ones Moses gave in Deut 17:14-20. Moses knew that the day was coming when Israel would ask for a king "like all the other nations have." When that day came, Moses wrote that Israel's king was to have it drilled into him that he was not above the law. He was to make a personal copy of the Torah and recite it every day. This devotion to God's word was designed to regulate his pride so that "his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers" (Deut 17:20). To foster his faith and curb his lusts for power, he was not to make foreign alliances, create a massive military budget or use his office to become rich.

These regulations are a testimony to God's infinite patience and constant compassion for his people. Though Israel continued to make wrong and hurtful choices, the Lord never responded in kind. Instead, he kept inserting his kindness and wisdom to help his people negotiate their way through the turbulent waters of their own choosing.

E. The dual response to God's choice (10:25b-27)

Then Samuel sent all the people away, each one to his home. Saul also went to his home at Gibeah, and with him went men of valor whose hearts God had touched. But some worthless fellows said, "How can this man save us?" And they despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace. (vv. 25b-27)

At the conclusion of the day's events, Samuel dismisses the assembly, sending everyone, including Saul, back to their home towns. As Saul made his way home to Gibeah, God moved among the hearts of many "men of valor" to pledge their allegiance to the new kingdom. This was the beginning of a standing military force and, as Bergen observes, "demonstrates that the Lord was supplying his anointed with the vital resources needed to fulfill his responsibilities."³ Once again, God's grace is at work within a government of the people's choice, imparting life and blessing to help them along the way.

As is often the case, there were also those who had no confidence in God's newly anointed. These were "worthless fellows" (lit. "sons of Belial"), renegades and social anarchists who defied all social order and

violated every form of decency (Deut 13:13; Judg 19:22, 20:13; 1 Sam 2:12). The label earlier described Eli's wicked sons, and in Judges 19, "the rapist scum from the city which Saul returns."⁴ These renegades look upon Israel's new king with contempt and ridicule him with disdain: "How can this one save us?" To Saul's credit, he remains silent and does not defend his reputation.

II. The New Commander in Chief (1 Sam 11:1-13)

Now that God has successfully flushed Saul out of hiding onto the public stage, a greater hurdle remains. How does he now manage to motivate this reluctant leader with no faith to do what kings are called to do, deliver God's people from their enemies? In the next scene, a foreign invasion on the other side of the Jordan hits home to this native son, catapulting Saul into his national role.

A. The serpent's invasion (11:1-3)

Then Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-gilead... (v. 1a)

Nahash ("serpent"), king of the Ammonites, had laid siege to Saul's home town, Jabesh-gilead. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947, we are given a bit more context behind the siege. The Samuel scroll (as well as the Greek versions) contains several additional verses that seem to have been lost in transmission of the text over the centuries. Many scholars accept these to be part of the original text:

Now Nahash the king of the Ammonites had been oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites grievously. He gouged out the right eye of each of them and struck terror and dread in Israel. No men of the Israelites who were across the Jordan remained whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But 7,000 men had escaped from the Ammonites and entered Jabesh Gilead. About a month later, Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-Gilead (see note 11:1ff. in TNIV).

These verses reveal that the siege upon Jabesh-gilead was part of a much larger campaign by Nahash to subjugate the entire territory of the Transjordan and humiliate Israel's God. His well-disciplined troops met little resistance from Israel's ill-equipped farmers. Adding humiliation to defeat, this sadistic monster left his mark on his captives by having their right eyes gouged out. The maimed survivors could still plow their fields, providing food for their conqueror, but they would be useless in combat, as the left eye "is typically screened by the warrior's shield."⁵ News of the "serpent's" swift victories and cruel torture paralyzed Israel in fear. We learn in chapter 12 that it was this Ammonite threat that actually provoked the elders to ask Samuel for a king (12:12).

As Nahash's relentless campaign moved north, seven thousand Israelites escaped the onslaught and took refuge in Jabesh-gilead, Saul's home town.

Then Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-gilead, and all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, "Make a treaty with us, and we will serve you." But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, "On this condition I will make a treaty with you, that I gouge out all your right eyes, and thus bring disgrace on all Israel." The elders of Jabesh said to him, "Give us seven days' respite that we may send messengers through all the territory of Israel. Then, if there is no one to save us, we will give ourselves up to you." (vv. 1-3)

Outmanned and outgunned, the besieged people offer a quick surrender over death. But acceptance comes with a price—Nahash's mutilating tattoo. In response, the people plan a ruse to buy a week's time from their intimidating oppressor. They offer to surrender peacefully if they can first send messengers to rally all Israel to "deliver" them. Like most tyrants, Nahash's giant ego blinds him to reality. Under the guise of playing fair, he accepts the offer, believing that Israel is so fractured and tim-

id they are incapable of mounting any significant military force. What this snake doesn't know is that Israel has a new king, anointed by God's Spirit—and what's more, his mother grew up in Jabesh-gilead. For this reason the messengers are sent directly and only to Saul in Gibeah.

B. The Spirit's invasion (11:4-7)

When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul, they reported the matter in the ears of the people, and all the people wept aloud. Now, behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen. And Saul said, "What is wrong with the people, that they are weeping?" So they told him the news of the men of Jabesh. And the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled. He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, "Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!" Then the dread of the LORD fell upon the people, and they came out as one man. (vv. 4-7)

Saul gets the news of the threat upon Jabesh as he is returning home from his domestic chores working his fields. After seeing the pitiful sight of his town weeping, the facts of the terrible siege are given to him. As he hears those words the Spirit rushes upon him with such force that his insides burn white hot with rage. His concerns are no longer domestic and local; now as Israel's commander in chief, they instantly become global. Saul is not about to allow his mother's home town to endure a second Auschwitz. In this way, God's Spirit uses injustice threatening a family to catapult a leader into a national role.

Incidentally, this was the way the ministry of the Community Pregnancy Centers (formerly Crisis Pregnancy Center) began in our valley. A family in our church had a daughter who was pregnant out of wedlock and contemplating abortion. The parents sought the Lord in prayer and convinced their daughter not to abort and to carry her child full term. She responded in faith and gave birth to a son. The family's experience so energized their faith and strengthened their bonds of love that they felt compelled to take God's redemptive work out into the community at large. Over twenty years later the ministry has thrived and, despite fierce opposition, has dispensed grace, hope and life to hundreds of men and women in crisis.

With surging strength, Saul butchers his two oxen and cuts them into twelve pieces to be sent throughout all the tribes of Israel as a call to holy war. Saul's summons to war comes with a threat. If God's people are not capable of rising above their domestic concerns to preserve the freedom of their nation, the king will personally see to it that their future economic potential will be severely crippled. The severed pieces of the king's bloody oxen are exemplary of his commitment. Kish's son has put his hand to a new plow and is not looking back.

When the FedEx truck deposits the king's packages throughout Israel, the entire population is gripped by holy terror. Not only does Saul attach the prophet's signature to his endeavor (I find it intriguing that Saul's name appears first), but also, this severance package evokes the horrific memory of the priest's concubine who had been raped and tortured to death in Gibeah. Like the oxen, she was cut into twelve pieces and sent as a rallying cry to all the tribes. No one in Israel dared forget the shock wave that enraged eleven tribes and united them for war. The irony is that Jabesh-gilead was the only town not to answer the call. What will happen to its citizens of now? The answer is that in God's kingdom, a cry for mercy from the oppressed always overrules the pained memories of history.

C. Disinformation (11:8-10)

When he mustered them at Bezek, the people of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand. And they said to the messengers who had come, "Thus shall you say to the men of Jabesh-gilead: "Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you

shall have deliverance." When the messengers came and told the men of Jabesh, they were glad. Therefore the men of Jabesh said, "Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you (lit. "good in your eyes")." (v. 8-10)

The nation responds to the call with overwhelming numbers, gathering for battle at Bezek, about ten miles to the west of Jabesh-gilead. Meanwhile, the messengers are sent back to their brothers in Jabesh-gilead with a coded message from Saul that Israel's army will intervene before dawn. The mention of deliverance by the time the sun is "hot" reminds us of the heat of Saul's anger. Saul's words turn their despair into joy. To aid their brothers in the ensuing attack, the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead spread disinformation among the enemy. The announcement of their surrender in the morning "is designed to disarm the Ammonites psychologically...[encouraging them] to drop their guard and celebrate with abandon during the night—exactly when vigilance is most needed."⁶ The last phrase is designed to feed their lustful appetites for the spoils of victory, "Tomorrow... you may do whatever is good in your eyes."

D. Decisive victory (11:11)

And the next day Saul put the people in three companies. And they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch and struck down the Ammonites until the heat of the day. And those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together. (v. 11)

Saul's employs tried and true military strategy, dividing his units and attacking on three fronts simultaneously during the last watch of the night, between 2 and 6 A.M. The forceful and concentrated attack takes the Ammonites by such surprise that victory is achieved by lunchtime. And the Spirit that united God's people as "one man" (v. 7) scattered the Ammonite survivors "so that no two of them were left together." In summary, we observe that the Spirit used means to achieve victory: Saul's oxen, the memory of Gibeah's concubine, disinformation and sound military strategy. But the fact that only three verses are allotted to the actual battle reveals that, though God uses means, victory is ultimately determined, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zech 4:6).

E. Epilogue: Life not death for one's enemies (11:12-13)

Then the people said to Samuel, "Who is it that said, 'Shall Saul reign over us?' Bring the men, that we may put them to death." But Saul said, "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has worked salvation in Israel." (vv. 12-13)

In the aftermath of the victory the people vent their resentment against those who refused to honor Saul at his inauguration. From their point of view, God has vindicated his anointed and they are now hungry for their king to be avenged. To their credit, they at least appeal to Samuel's wisdom before taking matters into their own hands. But before Samuel can answer, Saul, like an impatient schoolboy, interrupts with the theologically correct answer, giving full credit where credit is due—solely to the Lord. The day when God brings salvation is not a time to exact revenge, but one to offer life and forgiveness to one's enemies. God never argues with skeptics or scoffers. They are silenced with forgiveness, grace and life.

When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the good news of Christ's resurrection to those who had not only disdained Christ, they actually crucified him. But now that his work of salvation had been vindicated by his resurrection and ascension, Peter did not seek revenge for the death of his King. When those who heard his words were cut to the quick, they asked, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38).

This is how God deals with skeptics: they are silenced with forgiveness, grace and life.

III. Advice for Those “Caught Between Two Worlds”

In conclusion, I would like to offer some practical advice for those who are “caught between two worlds.”

A. Caution! God at work

The most important doctrine that we must keep aflame in our hearts is the sovereignty of God. Though God’s people refuse to submit to his rule by faith, God never gives up on them and goes away. With deep compassion and sovereign power he keeps reasserting himself back into their lives with offers of life and blessing. This truth will steady and anchor us in the most turbulent of seas. We must never give way to despair, thinking we are forever doomed by faithless choices or unwise policies made by those in authority over us. God is more than able to work in less than ideal circumstances, for “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (Isa 35:1).

B. Submit, believing that God is at work

Second, because the sovereign Lord is actively at work in whatever environment believers find themselves in, we are called to submit to the existing authorities. Addressing the believers in Rome, Paul states the matter unabashedly:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (Rom 13:1-2)

This is an incredible statement of faith when we consider that those in authority in Paul’s day were diametrically opposed to the Christian faith and violated every form of moral decency. But the apostles understood that God delights in establishing his kingdom, using the free and demented choices of world monarchs who do not even acknowledge his existence. The greatest example of this was the census decreed by the emperor Caesar Augustus. The political motive behind it was the emperor’s desire to increase the tax base and thus the wealth of his own treasury. Like everyone else in the empire, Joseph had to make the trek to his “ancestral town,” the city of David, to register for the census. Through the lens of faith we are able to see that by complying with Caesar’s decree, God was able to transport Mary and Joseph seventy miles south, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just in time to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Micah seven centuries earlier (Micah 5:2).

The apostles applied this principle of submission to harsh masters (Col 3:22-24), unbelieving husbands (1 Pet 3:1-6), and church leaders (1 Pet 5:5). Submission was not to be done begrudgingly or “only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord” (Col 3:22 TNIV). When believers cultivate such attitudes it not only impacts those we serve, it elicits amazement and awe from the world.

But sadly, we often lack such faith. We respond like the “worthless fellows” in our story, venting disgust and disdain over those whom God has placed over us. We bash our government leaders, malign our corporate heads, slander our elders, and complain about our husbands. This has to stop. For such behavior not only maligns the God we serve, it also blinds us to God’s secret but decisive hand at work within our warped world.

C. God judges in righteousness

Though we are called to submit to those in authority over us, we do not submit blindly. God is a righteous judge. He will bring every evil motive and deed to account. This was the case with Saul. His initial act of delivering Israel from her enemies was a pure gift of God’s Spirit, and not a result of his faith, character or devotion to God. However, it will be his faith and character and not his military exploits that will determine his fate as a leader. Though Saul’s words after the victory paid tribute to Israel’s God, his impropriety of upstaging Samuel raises suspicions about his humility and his ability to submit to the prophet. Our suspicions are confirmed when he attempts to deliver his son over to death and the people are forced to overrule their king, condemning him by his own words (14:45).

As Saul becomes increasingly more narcissistic he loses the support of his family and court. With faith and courage they challenge his unrighteous behavior. Submission does not entail being a doormat. Jonathan is perhaps the best example of one who lived in a less than ideal situation and was destined to go down with the ship. Yet as a man of faith, he confronted his father with the truth and gladly accepted his role as one who prepared the way for Israel’s new king. Eternal honor is bestowed on the one who made the ultimate sacrifice for Israel’s anointed. Because of Jonathan’s sacrifice, his children ate at the king’s table (2 Sam 9:10).

D. Can this one save us?

Finally, if God was able save his people from their enemies with a flawed and deranged Saul, how can his beloved Son fail to save us?

When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ’s Cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets. (Col 2:13-15, *The Message*)

1 Bruce K. Waltke, “*Humble Rulers: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel*,” Regent College BIBL 521, Lecture Notes, 2000, 150-151

2 Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 66.

3 Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 133.

4 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), 454.

5 Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 635.

6 Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 137.