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1 Samuel 11:14-12:25

Nineteenth Message

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IS THERE LIFE AFTER DIVORCE?

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Our text this morning is for any of you who have made terrible choices in life and the consequences of those choices live to haunt you. You know that God forgives, but you have a hard time forgiving yourself because the damage you have done to others seems irreparable. Though years have passed, those nighttime voices of condemnation are as fresh today as they were then. Is there life after divorce?

I. The Call to Court (1 Sam 11:14-15)

Then Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingdom.” So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed peace offerings before the LORD, and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly. (1 Sam 11:14-15 ESV)

After Saul had been vindicated as the Lord’s anointed by his decisive victory over Nahash the Ammonite, Samuel calls the people to the sacred site of Gilgal “to renew the kingdom.” Even though God has conceded to their request for a king, their insistence has created a wide breach in their relationship with their true King. Before Samuel steps down from office and turns over the keys of the kingdom to Saul, he needs to do to some significant repair work in their relationship with God. So he takes them back Gilgal, where it all began.

Gilgal was to the people of Israel what the cross and the empty tomb are to Christians. Gilgal was their point of entry into the Promised Land following 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Gilgal was where Joshua set up twelve memorial stones from the Jordan and renewed Israel’s covenant relationship with the Lord by circumcising all the males who came out of Egypt. Following Joshua’s obedience, the Lord proclaimed from heaven, “Today I have rolled away (*galal*) the reproach of Egypt from you” (Josh 5:9). So that Israel would never forget the significance of this day, they named the site Gilgal. Samuel kept its sacred memory alive by making it one of three cities of his annual circuit. It now becomes the most appropriate place for the people of God to repair their relationship with the Lord, prior to their trek down the treacherous road of monarchy.

II. Samuel on Trial (1 Sam 12:1-5)

A. Present cooperation (v. 1-2a)

And Samuel said to all Israel, “Behold, I have obeyed your voice in all that you have said to me and have made a king over you. And now, behold, the king walks before you, and I am old and gray; and behold, my sons are with you.

After Saul had been celebrated as Israel’s king, Samuel holds court one last time before closing the books on his lengthy tenure in office. He reminds the people that he has fully cooperated with their request for a king, as both he and his sons have relinquished their posts to make way for the new regime. Before making his final farewell address, the prophet places himself on trial before the people.

B. His life an open book (vv. 2b-3)

“I have walked before you from my youth until this day. Here I am; testify against me before the LORD and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken

a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you.”

Samuel is the epitome of godly leadership. He makes his life and ministry an open book before the people he served. He was not like his predecessor Eli, a sedentary priest who hid behind thick layers of ritual and used his office to feed his gluttonous appetites. Not Samuel. He was seldom found isolated in his office; he was a “walker.” For five decades he walked among his people, faithfully dispensing God’s word and impartial justice (Deut 16:19) in each of the principal towns along his sixty-mile annual circuit.

With astonishing courage, Samuel calls for witnesses to testify against him. In chapter 8, when he expounded on the “unjust” ways in which worldly kings operate, the governing verb which characterized the king’s ways was “take.” Kings will “take” everything you hold dear—your sons and daughters, the best of your land, your oxen and donkeys. Standing next to Israel’s first king, Samuel testifies that he refused to “take” one thing for himself. And if perchance he did, he vows to make full restitution, as the law required.

C. Unimpeachable integrity (vv. 4-5)

They said, “You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from any man’s hand.” And he said to them, “The LORD is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.” And they said, “He is witness.”

The people give unanimous testimony that Samuel’s life has been above reproach. Brueggemann observes: “In their awed, intimidated silence... Israel is forced to acknowledge Samuel’s innocence, which carried with it an implied vindication of his mode of leadership.”¹ The testimony of the people regarding his integrity lends even more weight and force to what follows.

III. Israel On Trial (1 Sam 12:6-19)

A. The call to examination (vv. 6-7)

And Samuel said to the people, “The LORD is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. Now therefore stand still that I may plead with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous deeds of the LORD that he performed for you and for your fathers.

Having been exonerated by the people as judge, Samuel puts on his prophet’s hat and prepares to unleash his full prophetic arsenal upon Israel. His spine-chilling call, “And now take your stand...before the Lord,” must have raised the hair on the back of their necks, as he steps into the role of God’s passionate prosecuting attorney. Samuel’s trial speech will become a model for future prophets when God has a “legal case” against this people.

B. The testimony of history (vv. 8-11)

“When Jacob went into Egypt, and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your fathers cried out to the LORD and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place. But they forgot the LORD their God. And he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Hazor, and into

the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab. And they fought against them.

Samuel summarizes Israel's covenant relationship with God from the Exodus through the period of the Judges. For four centuries, God proved faithful in his commitment to his people, delivering them from their enemies. Samuel lists examples from three different regions (Hazor to the north, Philistia to the southwest, and Moab to the east) to represent all of Israel's oppressors.²

And they cried out to the LORD and said, 'We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD and have served the Baals and the Ashteroth. But now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, that we may serve you.' And the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Barak and Jephthah and Samuel and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you lived in safety.

It didn't matter how many occasions God's people fell back into sin, every time they repented and cried out for mercy he overlooked their idolatry and rebellion and graciously raised up leaders to save them. Considering the spiritual depravity of the nation, the absolute dearth of godly men, and the lengths God had to go to accomplish victory during the Judges era, Israel should have been overcome with gratitude for such undeserved grace.

The last several decades should have given Israel even more cause to celebrate God's faithfulness with the appointment of Samuel as judge. Never had the nation experienced a leader of such fervent spirit, integrity of character and consistency since the days of Moses and Joshua. Nor had Israel ever experienced such an uninterrupted span of shalom, free from foreign threats. What in the world did the people have to complain about?

Thus far the sacred record appears a little one-sided. God has far exceeded his covenantal promises in his care for Israel. Israel, on the other hand, has little to cheer about from her wayward past.

C. The present indictment (vv. 12-13)

And 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. And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, the LORD has set a king over you.

Now we come to the present crisis, when the Ammonite "snake" (Nahash) swept through the eastern tribes of the Transjordan. Given God's impeccable record to forgive and deliver his people, one would have expected them once again to cry out to him, but instead they demand a king: "No, but a king shall reign over us!" After 400 years of being the recipients of God's loyal-love they want to replace divine sovereignty with human sovereignty. In layman's terms, they are asking God for a divorce. And what's worse, they have the audacity to think they can still remain on God's bank account and receive all his health benefits.

It's shocking, to say the least. But even more shocking is the fact that God concedes. God never violates our dignity as human beings by coercing his love upon us. Though deeply wounded, he doesn't mope around or make us feel sorry for him in order to manipulate our affection. Instead, he gives us what we choose. In forceful tones, Samuel places their choice right in front of them: "Look...look here he is, the one you chose, God did exactly what you asked!" This is it; there will be no going back.

What happens now? Hagglng attorneys, endless expenses, splitting the assets, fighting over time with the kids, and walking away in a gaping sorrow that never heals? Unfortunately, that's usually how relationships end in most divorce courts. But not this one.

D. The future outlook (vv. 14-15)

If you will fear the LORD and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be

well. But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king.

God doesn't walk away from his people, allowing them to suffer the consequences of their terrible choices alone. He offers to stay with them if they will repent and serve him with the whole heart. Though God has been violently wronged, he continues to forgive, and invites his adulterous bride into a future full of blessing, even under this faulty new arrangement. It's a future just as rich and bountiful as the promises he made on their wedding day. God is so magnanimous he makes this offer before Israel has expressed sorrow or taken responsibility for her crimes. Now it won't be easy. It will take everything they have—a renewed commitment with the whole heart—but the offer is freely given nonetheless.

Israel thought she had overhauled that old "kingdom train" with a new, shiny "royal" engine, hoping that it would take her across foreign boundaries into those forbidden worlds of "power" and "prestige." But God has trumped her new travel arrangements and refuses to let go. It's like traveling on one those international European trains. After you find an empty compartment, you settle down into a deep sleep, dreaming about your destination. Then suddenly you wake up with a jolt, only to discover that another engine has coupled itself to the back end of your train and now you're traveling in the opposite direction, to who knows where.

Samuel has just coupled God's tried and true engine, called "Deuteronomy," to the back of Israel's "kingdom train." As it pulls out of the station, Israel's shiny new engine is now the "royal caboose." Samuel has subverted the sovereignty of the monarchy and placed it under the authority of God's Torah and covenant. God is ready to renew his relationship with his people, but it will not be on Israel's terms. As Brueggemann writes:

The rhetoric of these lines is shrewd and devastating. The king is deliberately subsumed under the conventional structure of blessing and curse. Indeed, the king has no individual role to play but is simply one more member of the covenant community, subject to the same summons, available for the same blessings and curses. Rhetorically, the king does not even warrant his own treatment but is only mentioned as an afterthought, lucky to be mentioned at all.³

Yes, Israel will have kings, and they may think they are something to behold, but God will judge each one by his fidelity to God's covenant.

IV. The Perfect Storm (1 Sam 12:16-19)

A. The Judge "reigns" from heaven (vv. 16-18)

'Now therefore stand still and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call upon the LORD, that he may send thunder and rain. And you shall know and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking for yourselves a king.' So Samuel called upon the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day, and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.

Following Saul's stunning triumph over Nahash, jubilant Israel is about to board the new "kingdom train," with no conviction of the seriousness of their sin. But that won't do. As Peterson affirms: "God's grace is not slipshod indulgence" or "divinely subsidized self-centered willfulness."⁴ Therefore, for a second time Samuel commands the people to "take their stand," this time to see what the heavenly Judge has to say.

The prophet calls upon the Lord to send thunder and rain during the time of the wheat harvest, when the weather is seasonally dry. With the stalks heavy from full heads of grain, a thunderstorm wreaks havoc on their wheat harvest, resulting in a devastating financial loss. The nature parable is designed to teach Israel that their demand for a king was a sin of cosmic proportions. God has literally rained on their parade, so that the royal robes of their victorious king are now soaking wet beneath dark storm clouds that will hover above Saul for his entire term of office.

B. The people fear on earth (v. 19)

And all the people said to Samuel, “Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king.”

The perfect storm has accomplished its goal. As the people are visibly shaken by violent disruption in the created order, they finally begin to comprehend the magnitude of disruption that their demand for a king has created in their relationship with the Lord. They are just one step from going headlong over the cliff, as God’s thundering voice strikes an earlier chord from Hannah’s poem:

**The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces;
against them he will thunder in heaven. (1 Sam 2:10)**

Standing next to their humiliated king, the people finally take full responsibility for their sin. They cry out to Samuel to intercede for them “that we may not die.”

V. What Will the Future Bring? (1 Sam 12:20-25)**A. God will continue to be faithful (vv. 20-22)**

And Samuel said to the people, “Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil. Yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty. For the LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself.

God will never forsake those who take full responsibility for their sin. He still values their unique partnership and does not want it to end, so he forgives again and again. His grace to forgive does not permit continued indulgence, however, but instead enflames our hearts with a renewed zeal to forsake our idols and love God exclusively and completely. As our minds are renewed, we come to understand that the idols we once chased after are absolutely “empty” (*tohu*) and void of life. The term first appears in Genesis 1:2 to describe the “formless void” of the watery chaos of the primeval earth. “Here in 1 Samuel 12, the term ‘vain things’ refers to both the vacuum of idolatry and also, one suspects, the resulting chaos of abandoning God’s kingship.”⁵ A future filled with blessing and life still remains open for the people of God, but it will not be an easy one. As Peterson so aptly states:

This is no easy going religion being proclaimed with divinely subsidized self-centered willfulness and spiritual sloth... Just because you are not being damned on the spot for your sins doesn’t mean you are off the hook. Judgment, yes, but salvation also. And the two together require everything you have in you—“all your heart” (v. 24). God’s grace is not slipshod indulgence, but a rigorous enlistment in God’s ways with us.⁶

B. The prophet will continue to be faithful (vv. 22-25)

“Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and the right way.

Though Samuel is stepping down as Israel’s last judge, he has no plans to retire, for the institution of monarchy cannot function without the ministry of the prophet. And to that end he will serve until his death, daily interceding for the people he has come to love, and faithfully teaching them “in the good and right way.” Samuel retire? Are you kidding? The thought (“far be it from me!”) is unthinkable, reprehensible to him. How can a parent quit loving his children and grandchildren? Impossible!

During the five centuries of Israel’s monarchy, the prophets faithfully followed in Samuel’s footsteps and fervently kept the Torah permanently “coupled” to the people of God. Its supreme value was kept alive through the Babylonian exile and, in the modern era, survived the ashes of Nazi death camps and gas chambers. Yesterday I came across a poem of a child survivor from Slovakia. She told her story to an audience at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.⁷

When they were taking away our *shul* (synagogue)
Grandpa carried out the Torah
and we prayed at home

when they were pulling out his beard
he became speechless
and prayed in silence

when they were driving us out of our home
he took the scroll with him
because you can’t live without the Torah

when they drove us off the train
and ordered us to drop our luggage he disobeyed
because you can’t drop the Torah

they beat him yet he held on
although we begged him
Grandpa what are you doing

and so they beat him even more
reassured it was a treasure
—as it was.

Restoration is hard work. It cannot be achieved without a forgiving and gracious God in heaven, coupled with faithful intercessors and good teachers on earth. Only one more thing remains to secure Israel’s hope for the future: the fear of the Lord.

C. Will God’s people be faithful? (vv. 24-25)

“Only fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.”

While the perfect storm put the terror of God into the people, that divine jolt cannot sustain their obedience for very long. Like God’s appearance at Sinai, the majestic display of power created a holy terror in order that they might surrender their lives to God and be spared judgment. But the “fear of the Lord” combines a holy awe that takes God seriously, with a deep appreciation for his never-ending grace. The union of the two creates an enduring obedience, infused by an ever-increasing love for God. Without a love for God deeply rooted in our hearts there is no possibility of a consistent life of obedience.

But will Israel do it? Will God’s covenanted people enter through the narrow gate and recommit themselves to the hard road of discipleship? Samuel’s words conclude on a threatening note. The king in whom they had placed such high hopes is once again marginalized, with no special claims on God. He is portrayed as extra baggage rather than an asset, making Israel’s journey back to fidelity all the more cumbersome. Will this royal baggage be such a weight that it permanently crushes Israel’s ability to fully trust God?

Sadly for Israel, Samuel’s final words became prophetic. For five hundred years, the majority of Israel’s kings were “takers,” until eventually the people and her king were swept away. Israel’s “perfect storm” was a certificate of divorce from God that abandoned her to exile. Out of the ashes, Jeremiah had the courage to cry out for mercy once again:

**But you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
Why do you forget us forever?
Why do you forsake us for so many days?
Restore us to yourself, LORD,
that we may be restored!
Renew our days as of old—
unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lam 5:19-22 TNIV)**

VI. The New Math of Grace⁸

Will God forgive again? Or does the well of his grace eventually run dry? Peter sought the answer to this question from a human perspective.

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. (Matt 18:21-22)

In his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey calls this “the new math of grace.” Our text well illustrates the incomprehensible nature of God’s grace. It is so radical it scandalizes us. Let us reflect on three dimensions of it.

A. Forgiveness precedes repentance

Basking in the joy of Saul’s victory over Nahash, Israel was completely clueless about the depth of her sin or the pain she had caused to both God and his prophet Samuel. But though we are ignorant and cruel, our compassionate God still values our relationship beyond anything we can measure. With arms open wide he extends forgiveness before we are even aware of our sin. It takes two to reconcile, however. Restoration will never occur unless we come home and ask for forgiveness. And so with eyes fixed on the horizon the Father waits, longing for his wayward children to come home.

B. Conviction prods us to come home

But pride runs strong. Apart from a divine miracle, most of us would never come clean and publicly acknowledge our sin. But our text affirms that such a miracle is generously given from a holy God. Bill Arnold observes:

God’s grace to forgive takes shape first of all as grace to convict and uncover the hidden sinfulness of the human heart. Most Christians today stress only forgiveness as the ministry of God’s grace. But here the hard words of the prophet, bringing awareness that one is in need of forgiveness, is also a gift of God’s grace.⁹

I would add that even when the prophet’s words fail to break through hard hearts, the grace of God brings “the perfect storm” to bring us to our knees. On more than one occasion I have witnessed such a storm awaken defiant prodigals to taste the intensity of the pain their sin had caused to God and others. If you are presently living under an unmistakable weight of guilt, it is a sign that God’s grace is at work, pleading with you to come home. Don’t delay. Confess your sin and, like David, you will find that God will become your hiding place (Ps 32:7). This is God’s grace, wonderful grace.

C. Grace redeems and reconfigures

But there is more to grace than conviction and forgiveness. After Israel’s exile, God made a new arrangement for his people that catapulted his grace to new levels.

Here the sin of Israel, the very act of rejecting God’s authority and demanding a new and world form of human rulership, is not only forgiven by God but is actually transformed by God into a new instrument of his grace. The very existence of a human king in national Israel—a result of Israel’s sinful demands—is reconfigured into a savior. The institution of kingship paves the way for David, and his greater Son, Jesus. In the hands of God, even our failure and tragically sinful choices can be completely remade into something new and redemptive.¹⁰

This new arrangement made possible in Christ is so radical, the only terminology the prophets can use to describe it is, NEW CREATION. God’s grace reconfigured and redeemed the institution of monarchy, so that now the historically tenuous relationship between God and his people gives way to eternal bonds of unbroken love: “with everlasting love I will have compassion on you” (Isa 54:8).

**“For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,”
says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (Isa 54:10)**

Is there life after divorce? No question about it. But will we embrace it, or be scandalized by it? Supposing this holiday season you have to endure the company of those who have wronged you. Are you ready to forgive them before they ask? We know from the words of Christ that we have to forgive those who have wronged us, but often that is as far as it goes. Your adulterous relative enters your home with his new wife and baby and it takes everything in you just to tolerate their presence. Would you be scandalized if Jesus announced that he has chosen this marriage conceived in sin to display his wonders of his grace to future generations? Would you be scandalized if the name tags at their place settings read, “David,” “Bathsheba,” and “Solomon”?

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 90.

² Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 142.

³ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 93.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 72.

⁵ Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 115.

⁶ Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 72.

⁷ The poet Alvin Rosenfeld put the child survivor’s story into verse. Alvin H. Rosenfeld ed., *The Writer Uprooted, Contemporary Jewish Exile Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008), 54-55

⁸ I have relied heavily on Bill Arnold’s insightful arguments for my conclusion. Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 193-194.

⁹ Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 193-194.

¹⁰ Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 194.

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