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1 Samuel 16:14–23

Twenty Seventh Message

Brian Morgan

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WHERE'S MY STAGE?

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Last year I was dropping one of my grandchildren off at her elementary school and ran into a young mother whose wedding I had performed when I was college pastor at Stanford. I could tell she was troubled and wanted to talk. She explained that she had been reading letters from several of her classmates, who had remained single after college and now occupied high level positions in the corporate world, or had played a role in launching new charitable organizations to feed the poor, or were privileged to serve overseas on the mission field. By contrast she felt isolated in her middle class home and overwhelmed and exhausted raising two overactive preschoolers. Where's my ministry? Where's my stage? Is this all that I've been trained for?

Her question plagues many of us and reflects a God-given longing for significance. For believers the longing is further fueled by our conversion to Christ, our gifting by the Holy Spirit, and the call to make disciples of all nations. But for many the dream gets trampled by the hard road of reality—a difficult marriage, a learning disability, rejection by one's family, a long-term illness, infertility, unemployment, or caring for elderly parents. I have been wrestling with God lately on behalf of a good friend who has been unemployed for quite some time. I can't understand why God would allow the situation to go on so long when, in my opinion, he is so gifted, experienced and godly that he would be a gold mine of integrity to any employer. Where's his stage? Where's your stage?

This is the theme of our text today. McCarter writes that “It is an exciting moment in the biblical drama when David first steps on stage;”¹ but in my opinion, it's more exciting to see *how* David ends up on Israel's international stage. In the narrator's first of three introductions, we saw that David was raised in a prominent family of distinguished sons in Bethlehem. His three eldest brothers went to West Point and were now serving in the Royal Militia. The fourth was getting his MBA at Harvard, the 5th was studying law at Berkeley and the 6th and 7th were on football scholarships at Nebraska. David was the eighth son and the runt of the litter. In this home of towering sons, he was the smallest and grew up exiled with the sheep outside the family circle.

In families it usually takes the fierce and sometimes ugly competition of sibling rivalry for a son or daughter who resides outside the family circle to break through to the inside. Though the pain of rejection went deep, David refused to play the game of self-promotion. The sense of abandonment by his family gave David an abiding sense of God's presence and through his loneliness he developed a deeper sense of dependence on the Lord.

**For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the LORD will take me in. (Ps 27:10)**

Rejection by those closest to us can be a divine tool to deepen our trust in God. Faced with family rejection, David didn't campaign or lobby for significance to become a legitimate son in Jesse's family. In the opening scene David speaks not one word, nor is he the subject of any action. Out in the wilderness David developed a faith like Han-

nah's, who believed God “raises up the poor from the dust...to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Sam 2:8). This is perhaps the most outstanding trait of David throughout his entire lifetime – he never once seized the crown. If he was destined to be Israel's king, it had to be given as a gift by God and God alone.

Thus we discover that the Lord, who delights in David, is the one behind the scenes, who orchestrates all the action to exalt the son. Through the prophetic word the exiled youth is brought in from the sheepfolds and placed right in the center of the family circle. In the midst of his shocked brothers this unlikely candidate is drenched with anointing oil and duly empowered by God's Spirit, the only credential essential for kingship.

As this unlikely candidate is set apart and duly empowered, we can't help but wonder how David will make his ascent from Bethlehem to the royal court. Because David's path to the throne is typological of Jesus' exaltation, and because we are in Christ, our text will help us discern God's mysterious ways in our lives. May God in his grace open the eyes of our hearts to see not just the glory we are destined for, but the “way” to glory.

Literary Structure

A Problem: The **Spirit** of the Lord leaves Saul; an evil spirit terrorizes him (14)

B The servants *see* the problem and offer a **solution** of a musician who can play *well* (15-16)

C Saul commands his **servants** to provide a man (17)

X David's resume is put forward (18)

C' Saul sends **servants** to Jesse (19-20)

B' Saul is pleased with the **solution** and loves David (21-22)

A' Problem solved: all is **well** (at least for now...) (23)

David plays, Saul is refreshed and is *well*, evil spirit leaves.

I. Evil Spirits and Insightful Servants (1 Sam 16:14-17)

A. The problem (v. 14)

Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him. (1 Sam 16:14 ESV)

The narrator's second introduction takes us from Jesse's home in Bethlehem to the royal court of king Saul, where we find him in a deplorable condition. The key word that sets the theme for this episode is “*ruah*” (“spirit”). It is found seven times (6x as a noun, and once as a verb “to refresh, give relief”) and frames the scene with elegant verbal symmetry. Whereas the Spirit of God rushed upon David with power, just the opposite has happened to Saul. Because of his persistent disobedience and refusal to repent, God's Spirit that had empowered him as king has left him. And into that spiritual vacuum “an evil spirit *from* the LORD tormented him.” The term “torment” is graphic, depicting Saul as being overwhelmed and terrified. “A predominant function of this word is to express the terror of a lesser individual who stands in the presence of a greater individual—often times a human being be-

fore a numinous being.”² Saul’s symptoms may have resembled those of a manic-depressive, who one moment is driven by insane rage, and the next, falls into a deep depression.³

The narrator makes it clear (vv. 14, 15, 16, 23) that this spirit is *from* the Lord, not *of* the Lord. Though the idea that God was the ultimate source of Saul’s trouble may trouble us, we should take comfort that because God is sovereign, this spirit, along with all creation, is subject to him, sent from his court, and serves the divine purpose. Saul’s tortured state was the direct consequence of his disobedience to a direct command of God, which Samuel declared was equivalent to the sin of divination (15:23). As Bruce Waltke explains,

The Scriptures do not clearly represent the origin of such a spirit—suffice it to note that throughout Scripture the divine causality where God appears responsible for evil refers to instances where God increases evil already present to hasten the divine judgment. . . . “God’s power operates. . . within the evil which has been begun by the perversion of the creature’s will” (Walter Eichrodt).⁴

When we open the New Testament we find that Israel is in the same condition as Saul. Evil spirits are oppressing people and exercising power in synagogues and palaces of power. But when they see Jesus, they cower in fear, knowing they are subject to his authority as the Holy One of God. And they did his bidding with just a word. Jesus in turn empowered the apostles with the same authority. When the church in Corinth failed to discipline a man who was committing incest, Paul delivered him over “to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5).

B. Saul’s servants propose a solution (vv. 15-17)

And Saul’s servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” So Saul said to his servants, “Provide (lit. “see”) for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” (vv. 15-17)

Saul’s deplorable condition is obvious to everyone but Saul. Having turned his back on the Lord, he is no longer able to “see” reality. But his spiritual blindness is no impediment to God, for he has untold servants who can “see” what the king fails to see. Like a unified chorus, Saul’s servants give the correct diagnosis of Saul’s malady and politely propose a solution. Perhaps sensing that “Music has Charms to soothe the savage Breast,” (William Congreve, in *The Mourning Bride*, 1697) Saul’s attendants propose that he send them to find a musician who can play the lyre with skill to attend to the king. Whenever the evil spirit descends upon him, his melodious strings will soothe Saul’s psychoses and he will be “well.” The lyre was a stringed instrument that normally had two arms rising up from the sound box. The strings were attached to the crossbar at the top of the instrument.

The suggestion meets with Saul’s immediate approval. When subjected to endless pain, even the proud become open to help from outside sources. The royal edict is given: “Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” The command, a surprising echo of God’s words in verse 1, makes Saul appear more like a puppet in God’s hands than Israel’s sovereign.

How does God get his unknown servant into the royal court? The answer is through evil spirits and unnamed servants. His ways are inscrutable! Over the years I’ve discovered that hospitals are holy stages where God makes the most unlikely connections for healing more than bodies.

C. David’s resume put forward (v. 18)

One of the young men answered, “Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him.” (v. 18)

You’ll recall at the beginning of Saul’s story in chapter 9, when he went searching for his lost donkeys, Saul was totally dependent on a “youth” (*“na’ar”*) to counsel him where to go and whom to seek for help. Now before the search party is even organized, “one of the young men” steps forward with David’s resume already in hand. He reads down the list of impressive qualifications in six word pairs that are so astonishing, they leave no room for alternatives. Saul’s is searching for a paramedic and his servant has found a neurosurgeon.

The qualities listed are way beyond what we would expect anyone to know about the teenage shepherd, including David. Knowing how the story unfolds, we see more than the characters perceive. The list is prophetic and foreshadows how David’s character will ultimately develop as Israel’s ideal king. This is how God sees David (and by implication, *how God sees us!*) and thus, how he promotes him to Saul. It’s as if God manipulates the deck so that the blind king is forced to pick the one card that he has already chosen.

David’s musical skill is extraordinary, and will earn him the title “sweet singer in Israel” (2 Sam 23:1). But, as we will discover in chapter 17, David brings more to the plate than his musical skills. Militarily, he will be praised for his bravery (“a man of valor” or “powerful person” which would refer to a member of the ruling class – the same phrase was used of Saul’s father, Kish) and fighting ability (“a man of war” or “trained fighter”). He also “speaks well,” a gift that is essential for kings and one that will give David the ability to penetrate Saul’s heart and bring his evil motives to the surface. Add to these traits David’s physical beauty and we begin to grasp his tremendous magnetism that will cast a spell on everyone in Saul’s house and cause all Israel to love him. David is the ultimate Renaissance man – musical, rugged, articulate and attractive.

The final qualification, “*the Lord is with him*,” is the pivot and turning point of the scene. Fokkelman notes that the narrator has constructed the two scenes in perfect verbal symmetry. There are exactly 73 words on either side of the phrase “*with him*”. Saul hears the phrase solely in terms of his immediate needs for relief, but we hear much more. The fact that the “Lord is with him” not only enables David to soothe Saul’s psychoses, it also guarantees his ascension to the throne. As Fokkelman suggests, “While Saul and his court think they are welcoming a musician, we realize that the Saulide monarch is dragging in a Trojan horse.”⁵ Indeed this is a turning point in the life of Saul, and David, not to mention all Israel. Later in Israel’s history the hopeful “God is with him,” will become Emmanuel, “*God with us*.”

II. The Great Exchange – Son (1 Sam 16:19-22)

A. Saul sends servants to Jesse (vv. 19-20)

Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with the sheep.” And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. (vv. 19-20)

Saul takes the bait and gives the executive order, asking Jesse to “send” him his son, David. I suspect Saul’s unrelenting pain made him eager to skip the lengthy process of a nationwide search. Ironically Saul is the first one in the story to mention David by name. Saul’s designation of David as being “with the sheep” identifies him as a shepherd, a figure commonly used in the ancient world for a king.

Jesse complies with the order and sends a very generous gift with his son to honor the king.

In the first scene, David was the center of celebration at the feast; but in this scene he is the messenger who brings a feast in homage to the king. Some commentators suggest that the gift could have been “a donation to the royal kitchen, since David himself was part of the king’s house.”⁶

As we watch God orchestrate his son to the royal court we discover that the path to exaltation is “down” not “up.” The one with the royal anointing is taking on the role of a servant at the beckoning of his father, just as his Greater Son would don a towel to wash the feet of his disciples. If we desire God to use us on a holy stage, then we must never forget that the primary quality that commends us to others is not authority, but *humility*. As the apostle Paul exhorts us in the letter to the Philippians,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Phil 2:5-7)

B. Saul pleased with the solution (vv. 21-22)

And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” (vv. 21-22)

The divine medicine works like a charm and Saul is smitten – “he loved him greatly.” Saul is so taken by David that he immediately promotes him from court musician to his innermost circle of confidants as one of his armor-bearers. This was a position of status in the royal court and gave David intimate access to the king at all times. Serving in close proximity to the king, David would be able to offer immediate relief to Saul whenever the evil spirit would torment him.

Love works wonders even on this egotistical monarch, for there is a subtle but profoundly different tone in his voice in verse 22. No longer does he issue an order to Jesse, as a king would to one of his subjects (v.19); instead he appeals to him politely as a brother, asking for his permission (lit. “may David *please* stand in my presence”) that his son continue in his service. And the motive given is not his royal prerogative, but his affection for David (“for he has found favor in my eyes”). Saul loves this new son because he serves his purposes. But as soon as David grows in favor beyond Saul’s control, his love instantly turns into a jealous rage. Fokkelman captures the pathos this will later bring Saul:

Just as Jesse’s sons were led before Samuel, so David comes – as the Hebrew phrase puts it – “to stand before” the king. The innocent Saul, i.e. the Saul who for just one moment is still himself, when there are no suspicions as to the true destiny of the youth to undermine him and confirm his misfortune, is now the subject of the feelings which David’s charming appearance arouses in everyone: he loved him dearly. The first person whose love for David is mentioned in the text is Saul!...it is because of this that the pain becomes even more heart-rending for Saul when he has to turn against his rival.⁷

Like a puppet on a string, Saul dances to every subtle twist and pull of the invisible strings. Consider the tragic irony of this moment—the king who refused to obey the command of the Lord, now becomes the blind instrument of his rival’s ascension and the obedient servant of his own destruction. The sage’s proverb rings true:

The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. (Prov 21:1)

C. Epilogue: Problem solved, all is well (at least for now...) v. 23

And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him. (v. 23)

The proposal by the unnamed servant is adopted and works to perfection. Whenever the evil spirit fell upon Saul, David took up his lyre and his playing lifts Saul’s oppression. The word translated as “refreshed” is a verbal form from the same root as “spirit.” David not only removes the harmful spirit, but also is the source of Saul’s well-being through the enablement of God’s Spirit. All is well, at least as long as Saul is willing to swallow the David pill.

III. Where’s Your Stage?

A. Don’t seek to build your own stage

Our text is great news that we don’t have to spend our lives trying to create a stage for our own significance. David contributes nothing in his exaltation from the field to the royal court. Instead, what we see behind the scenes is the constant, resolute, sovereign will of God. He selects the king of his choice. He then uses the most unlikely instruments to maneuver his servant to the stage of his choice. An evil spirit creates the need; unnamed servants propose the solution and identify David; and an arrogant, disobedient king issues all the executive orders. David simply obeys and accepts the invitation to serve on God’s stage. As a result David makes his entrance into the royal court. Similarly, in speaking about the office of High Priest, the author of Hebrews writes,

And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” (Heb 5:4-5)

Our anointing is similar, as Paul points out to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:4-6), that our spiritual gifts are given by the sovereign direction of the One Spirit; the ministry where we use our gifts is determined by our One Lord; and the different and varied impacts of our ministries is determined by our One God.

B. Focus on your character

What commends us to others is not power or authority, but our humility and ability to offer people spiritual life. What we find in David’s life is how he responded to rejection by cultivating sweet intimacy with the Lord through music and song. And even after he is anointed, he doesn’t parade his gifting to his family like Joseph did, or market his gift in the political arena. Rather he takes the low road of serving a depressed king in obedience to his father. As we wait for our stage and live in the tension that waiting creates, we are presented every day with the opportunity for God to reshape our character. The result is that we learn to trust in his covenantal faithfulness, knowing that he who began a good work in us, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6).

This was my encouragement to my friend struggling with the isolation and insignificance of parenting her small children: your ministry is right here as you participate in the ethnically diverse community that makes up your school and neighborhood. God has brought the mission field to your doorstep, and through your children given you a stage to be the sweet aroma of kingdom life among the nations. When Emily and I first moved into our neighborhood, I was bursting with evangelical passion and wanted to launch a bible study, invite the

neighbors and lead them to Christ. But Emily wisely saw a different path for us, and as our children entered elementary school she quietly began to serve, volunteering at the school and inviting new friends to share in our family life. Through the back door of humble service, God gave us a stage in our local school community and we watched in awe as God brought in the harvest.

C. Don't run away from confrontation

Picture this scene from David's viewpoint. Being rejected at home, he finds a new father who really loves him. But it doesn't take long for David to discover that Saul loved him only because he met his personal needs. As soon as David grew beyond being the king's puppet, Saul's love turned instantly into jealous rage. What pain for David, yet to his credit, even after several attempts on his life, David still maintains his respect and calls him "father" (24:11) when he has to confront him with his sin.

God's kingdom does not grow in a terrarium where growing conditions are controlled and ideal. Rather, God's kingdom breaks into the old and corrupt order and confronts world forces of darkness through his anointed servants. Moses confronts Pharaoh; Samuel confronts Eli; David confronts Saul, and so on. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12) to confront the devil. During his ministry he confronted the Jewish authorities and was rejected and killed. But his rejection paved the way for the Gentiles to enter the kingdom of God.

D. Choose your weapon wisely

Our text offers us one last surprising bit of counsel as we live the tension between anointing and ascension. Rembrandt van Rijn masterfully captures the scene in his famous painting, *Saul and David* (1655-1660). Saul sits in the foreground. He is clothed in the majestic garb of an oriental monarch and crowned with a turban twice the size of his head. Rays of light illuminate the beauty and exquisite detail of his rich apparel, but his face exudes exhaustion, overwhelmed by darkness. His right eye gazes out into nothingness, unable to focus. Saul's right hand rests lightly on his spear, and with his left he covers half of his face with his dark cloak, as if to shield him from a foreboding presence that he cannot see. Here is a king, with no vestige of kingship save his clothes. In contrast, almost hidden in the shadows, is David, who is supremely focused as his hands move skillfully on his harp. Which weapon will prevail over the darkness, the spear or the harp?

It is here David saw that the power of inspired praise set to music conquers demons of darkness, and is more powerful than the swords of deranged and demonic potentates. David will return again and again to his weapon of choice, crafting countless psalms of petition and praise and broadcasting his determination to trust God with his future. Later, betrayed and hunted by Saul, David is offered the opportunity to take Saul's life in the cave of Engedi but he resists the temptation and fortifies his faith in song:

**I am in the midst of lions;
I am forced to dwell among man-eating beasts,
whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.
My heart, O God, is steadfast,
my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music.
Awake, my soul!
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn. (Ps 57:4, 7-8)**

This past fall, Emily and I found ourselves in the midst of a crisis, and we struggled in vain to hold at bay the flood of chaos that threatened to overwhelm us. One Saturday morning in particular, when I was unable to keep my anxiety in check, I opened Psalm 46 (the Psalm from which Martin Luther wrote *A Mighty Fortress is our God*) and focused on the first verse:

**God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.⁸**

Despite my attempts, I could not shake my anxiety – until I came to church the next morning and heard Tim Paaske's violin resonate with the opening measures of Luther's timeless hymn. That morning, with Bernard's exhortation to stop fighting the flood and climb in the boat with Noah, and with two different versions of *A Mighty Fortress* ringing in my ears, my spirit was finally "refreshed" and the anxiety totally lifted.

The choicest weapon in our arsenal, David tells us, is inspired praise and prayer set to music and sung in the company of believers. When we think of David's greatest legacy, it was not his military exploits or political prowess that endured; it was his Psalms. For three thousand years they have been a constant source of eternal life to the believers, not to mention Jesus. The apostle Paul will later commend this weapon to us as well, as we daily confront the evil that surrounds us:

"...be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father." (Eph 5:18-20)

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, may "the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Col 3:16-17)

1 P. K. McCarter Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary AB* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 282.

2 "torment" – Miles V. Van Pelt, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. בָּעָוָה (*bā'at*), NIDOTTE, 1:692.

3 "Evil spirit" could also be translated an "injurious" spirit, as the niv translators have rendered it, denoting a "destructive" or "dark" mood that produces a foreboding sense of doom. But Waltke suggests that "Since this spirit is referred to infrequently in the OT, it is best not equated with a purely human/earthly emotional state or mental illness such as depression or melancholia." Bruce Waltke, *Humble Rulers: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel*, Notes, Regent College, 2000.

4 Waltke, *Humble Rulers*.

5 Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, (Assen: Van Corcum, 1986), 135.

6 John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

7 Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 139-140.

8 The Hebrew here is literally "a help in distresses found exceedingly," i.e. easily found and near. We always need him, but we experience his presence especially when we go through a period filled with anguish and distress.