



THE SAFEST SANCTUARY

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

Catalog No. 954
1 Samuel 19:18-24
Seventh Message
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April 10, 1994

One of the gravest concerns facing Christians today is the invasion of evil into the foundational institutions of our nation. Our ancient sanctuaries are no longer safe. Not just our decaying cities, but even suburbia, the once-peaceful Eden to which many aspired, now must deal with drive-by shootings. With the invasion of drugs and gangs, our once-safe schools have become intimidating places. Even our sports fields are not exempt from danger. Our children must deal with abusive coaches, and some parents are so obsessed with success that violence has become a real threat. Just last week the *Mercury News* reported that teams in Ventura, in southern California, have dropped the normal handshake after games for fear of fist fights.

One of our high schoolers has written this poem describing his pain in growing up in today's world:

I sit in my room
Not to be shown
I don't come out
For fear of the unknown
I want to cry
I cannot weep
The only thing I can do is sleep,
When I dream
I dream of songs
That helped me when my day was long
I see certain images
During my rest
Thinking about being only second best
I fought and struggled
All I could
Never seeing what was good
And when I wake
I see the sun
All my dreams leave and run
I feel alone
I feel like I'm the only one
The cycle repeats on and on
All I can do is think of what is gone.

At least my young friend has a good home to flee to. But many today have no safe haven. Where do you turn when even your own home is not safe?

This was David's problem, as we have been learning in our studies in the book of 1 Samuel. Under Saul's death sentence, David was forced to flee his home. It was no longer a sanctuary, but a trap for him. Where could he go for protection? This is the question that many have to face today. Where do you go when your home is no longer safe? And what do we do as Christians when the foundational institutions of the nation

are so corrupt they can no longer be considered safe?

Our text this morning from 1 Samuel 19, the chapter which we have called "The Great Escapes," has very good news for us.

I. Saul Attempts Death Three Times Through Intermediaries (19:18-22)

Now David fled and escaped and came to Samuel at **Ramah**, and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went and stayed in **Naioth**. And it was told Saul, saying, "Behold, David is at **Naioth in Ramah**." Then Saul sent messengers to take David, but when they saw the company of the **prophets prophesying**, with Samuel standing and presiding over them, the **Spirit of God came upon** the messengers of Saul; and they **also prophesied**. And when it was told Saul, he sent other messengers, and they **also prophesied**. So Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they **also prophesied**. (NASB)

(a) A School of Prophets: Naioth in Ramah

Finding that he is no longer safe in his own home, David escapes Saul's clutches a third time and flees to Samuel's home town in Ramah. Ramah (which means "height") lay about two and a half miles due north of Gibeah of Saul. Arriving there, David shares with Samuel everything that Saul had done to him. Samuel probably was not surprised. Of course we would love to hear the comforting, encouraging words that the prophet spoke to the new king, but we are not told what passed between them. Rather, what we are told is the place where they took refuge: Naioth in Ramah. It is very significant that in seven verses the word "Naioth" appears five times and "Ramah" six.

Most scholars believe that Naioth was not a geographical name, but rather a reference to the dwellings where Samuel housed his school of the prophets. According to the rabbis, "Naioth" were dwellings, or the common residences of the prophets. The Targum (the Aramaic paraphrase of the Old Testament) renders Naioth "house of instruction." Thus, Naioth were the dormitories of the prophets.

Samuel began this little academy in response to the religious and spiritual decline in Israel in his day. After the time of the Judges, all of Israel's religious institutions had been corrupted, and subsequently they were judged by the LORD. The ark had been lost to the Philistines and the tabernacle destroyed. Out of this moral vacuum, Samuel gathered together men who hungered to cultivate their spirituality and return Israel to her spiritual roots. Thus was born the first school of the

prophets.

One of the commentators describes the curriculum of this school: "It is generally assumed that the stock education was the study of law and history of Israel, as well as the cultivation of sacred poetry and music to lift the senses to the Spirit of God and prepare them to receive divine revelation." The cultivation of poetry and music can be inferred from 1 Samuel 10:5. There we read that musicians walked in front of the prophesying prophets, playing as they went along. Perhaps this was where some of the early monastic orders got the idea of living in common buildings and performing certain sacred duties. But here in Naioth in Ramah, the purpose of Samuel's men was not to withdraw from the world, but to gather for mental and spiritual training, that they might exert a more powerful influence upon their contemporary world. Such schools of the prophets appeared again in the days of Elijah and Elisha, the most corrupt time in the history of Israel (1 Kings 20:35), when considerable numbers of prophets lived in Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho.

In Jesus' day, we find the same method used by our Lord, who gathered to himself a small band of disciples. Throughout church history this is the model that has been followed. Small bands of disciples bind themselves together so as to cultivate their spirituality, placing themselves under the discipline of the word, and expressing it in preaching, poetry and music.

Rowland Bell, the father of our director of interns, Bernard, founded just such a "school of the prophets" when he was a missionary to Thailand, in 1981. Instead of teaching in the seminary, he sought out farmers who had a heart for the Scriptures. These men studied together one hour each day, and then meditated on their studies during the rest of the day as they worked in the fields. In addition, they studied one full day a month, and one full week a year. In six years of study and meditation, Rowland Bell took this group of men through the entire Scriptures. They were far better trained than seminarians, so much so that his method of teaching and discipleship was incorporated in the curriculum of the local seminary.

So David fled to the dormitory of the prophets, to Naioth in Ramah.

(b) The Invasion of Holy Ground

Now the question that springs from this text is, What happens when the king and his royal messengers invade the humble dwellings of the prophets? Who wins the confrontation between king and prophet?

When the agents arrive in Ramah, they see the company (or congregation) of prophets in ecstasy, with Samuel, their choirmaster, presiding over them. Strangely, David is left out of the picture (perhaps to denote that he was under such complete protection by the Lord that he could not even be seen). Then the powerful Spirit overcomes the agents of Saul and draws them into the divine activity. They, too, fall into the world of the divine imagination. In the process, they forget the mandate to arrest David. Calvin comments:

"God changed their [the messengers] thoughts and purpose, not only so that they failed to apprehend David according to the royal command, but so that they actually became the companions of the prophets. And God effected this, that the fact itself might show how He holds the hearts of men in His hand and power, and turns and moves them according to His will."

Undaunted, Saul sends another group of messengers to accomplish his work. But they meet with the same result. The lesson is obvious: Naioth in Ramah is not Saul's world; it is Samuel's world, the world where the Spirit rules. Again the Spirit breaks in upon the messengers and shatters their world of mundane orders and errands, making them in the process completely available for celebration with God.

The text is replete with repetitive vocabulary: "Naioth" is used five times; "Ramah" six times; "prophesy" or "prophet" eight times; the "Spirit of God came upon" two times, framing the passage in repetition. Walter Brueggemann comments, "the backbone of repetitiveness hammers home the fact that while David escapes, there is no one who escapes the power of the Divine Spirit."

Verse 21 marks the center of the scene and the turning point of the text. Saul pays no heed to the reports or the lessons. In fine executive style, he reasons that if he wants something done, he had better do it himself.

II. Saul Attempts Death In Face to Face Confrontation (19:22-24)

Then he himself **also** went to Ramah, and came as far as the large well that is in Secu; and he asked and said, "Where are Samuel and David?" And someone said, "Behold, they are at **Naioth in Ramah**." And he also proceeded there to **Naioth in Ramah**; and the **Spirit of God came upon** him **also**, so that he went along **prophesying** continually until he came to **Naioth in Ramah**. And he **also** stripped off his clothes, and he **also** prophesied before Samuel and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Therefore they say, "Is Saul **also** among the **prophets**?"

(a) If you want it done right, do it yourself!

The incorrigible Saul refuses to learn from what happened to the messengers. He even negates his own previous experience when he became king and the Spirit came upon him (1 Sam 10:10). Off he goes in full royal determination. But when he arrives at the place of the well, he hesitates, asking questions that he already knows the answers to. "He appears to hesitate just at the moment that David comes within range. Instead of the king boldly completing his march and summarily arresting his rival, his subconscious now appears to slow him down, so that he wastes energy in superfluous checks" (Fokklemann). Saul hesitates because he has a flashback to the time when he was anointed as king. After he had lost his donkeys, he came to a well looking for a prophet to help him on his errand (9:11). That meeting changed his destiny. The prophet overruled his errand. Now he is brought back to that begin-

ning as king and made to face the crisis caused by his own disobedience. Saul cannot continue without being squarely confronted with his past, something he has adamantly refused to do up to this point.

This is what God does with us at times, isn't it? We are going along in our disobedience and suddenly God brings before us our past. Of course, we don't want to face it, but we cannot go on unless we do so.

(b) Slain in the Spirit!

Saul, however, musters up enough courage to proceed. But the Spirit breaks in upon him even before he gets to Naioth in Ramah, so there is no hostile confrontation with the prophet. As a matter of fact, when Saul meets Samuel, the king is already prophesying! Upon his arrival, he immediately strips before the prophet and lays down before him, naked, like an infant. Now we find that both Jonathan and Saul have stripped before David, the newly-anointed king. But note the difference. Jonathan freely strips, while Saul has to be coerced. Jonathan's stripping is a symbol of the highest love and nobility, but Saul strips because of his shame.

Here is the lesson: When the king invades the prophet's holy turf, it is the prophet who wins the confrontation, not the king. Despite his obstinacy and authority, the king is no match for the Spirit. In this last scene Saul is in absolute involuntary subjection, stripped and naked, just as he will be at the end of the story (1 Sam 31:8). Picture this: the king (who was known for his height), lying down in subjection to the prophet, lost in unconsciousness. In the first three scenes in chapter 19, David escapes and averts death; now, in the climactic fourth scene, in face to face confrontation with Saul, death is not only averted, it is overcome. This foreshadows the fact that it is Saul who will die, not David.

The proverb, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" immortalizes the truth. "This snapshot places Saul's state in time, perpetual, like an old photograph and seals his fate" (Fokklemann). The reader now knows that though the plot may take time to unravel, Saul is finished as king. It was the same proverb that began his ministry, and now the one which seals his doom. He is without hope because God has departed from him.

Reflections

I would like to make three applications from this text.

(a) Who wins the battle?

"Saul lay down naked all that day and all that night"

We do not need to fear when evil penetrates our homes, schools, and governments, because people who wield earthly powers are simply no match for people who possess Spirit. As we have seen in our text, the effusion of the Spirit is so powerful it draws everything under its influence. When the Jewish authorities presented themselves in face to face confrontation with Jesus, the same, almost humorous effect resulted. Jesus' endowment of Spirit was so great (Isa 11:2) that the mere mention of his name ("*I am*", John 18:6) caused his enemies to collapse in involuntary submission. Jesus had to pick them up so they could arrest him!

Saul of Tarsus would learn this same lesson the hard way. He marched into holy turf, with legal sanction to put Christians to death, but on the Damascus Road he fell down, blinded before the risen Christ. For three days and nights he lay helpless, naked, like a baby, and then he became an apostle and a prophet. When evil seeks to invade holy ground, it is no match for Spirit.

(b) Where do we flee? "*Naioth in Ramah*"

Where should we flee when our world is no longer safe? Our text instructs us to flee to where the Spirit of God is. And where is that? Remember that this gift has been given to the church in full measure. Following Pentecost, this vignette in Naioth in Ramah was multiplied worldwide in the church. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 quotes the prophet Joel:

"In the last days, I will pour out **My Spirit** upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall **prophesy**
And your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even upon my bondslaves, both men and women,
I will in those days pour out **my Spirit**
and they shall **prophesy.**" (Acts 2:17,18).

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews addresses this issue of where to flee when the pressure rises. The house churches in Rome, faced with a threat of persecution and loss of property, began to return under the cover of the synagogue for legal protection. Hebrews was written to instruct them not to do this, for legal protection without Spirit is no protection at all. This is why the writer said, "not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some...let us go outside the camp bearing His reproach" (10:25; 13:13). That is the place of refuge, not legality or politics, but Spirit.

(c) What do we cultivate? *Schools of the Prophets*

1. Discipleship with those of like spirit

Today, we are living in an age when our national institutions are morally corrupt, just like the court of Saul in the days of Samuel. Our text from 1 Samuel tells us what we should do in response: We should gather in little bands of disciples. The basis of our relationship is not academic degrees or worldly success, but, like the Thai farmers, hearts that are spiritually sensitive. This is why as pastors whenever we travel, we go in teams, in company with other believers. Then truth reverberates with power, creating earthquakes of renewal.

2. Discipleship under the Word of God set to music

David saw God's power released to subdue evil by Samuel's presiding over the prophets as they prophesied. The anointed king made this ceremony a permanent institution in Israel. According to 1 Chronicles,

"And he appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, even to lament, and to thank and praise the LORD God of Israel." (1 Chr16:4)

David directed the Levites, with a choir director presiding over them, to sing, praise, and lament, as a permanent institution is Israel. This is why we find the

dedication *"for the choir director"* in many of the Psalms.

Since that day three thousand years ago, God's people have been singing God's word. This is what draws people in, and this is where the power lies. Paul would instruct the church,

"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." (Eph 5:18-19).

This is what subdues evil. So when the invasion comes, don't fear, but prophesy.

Before my children were old enough to attend high school, on occasion I would drive by the school they would eventually be attending. I was concerned about the forces that even then were invading high school campuses: drugs, gangs, weapons, immorality. I began to pray every time I went past the campus that God would send his Spirit to that place. When at last my daughters began attending there, Emily and I went to football games and sat with the other parents. There, amidst all the activity and ceremony, I would pray for that school. When my daughter began playing for the softball team, I offered to help the coach, and he allowed me to become involved. The following year, however, the new coach told me I could no longer do this because I hadn't been certified as a coach. A few weeks later he relented and I again began helping out. This past fall the coaches asked me to become certified. They even asked me if they could host a potluck dinner for all the parents of the players at our church.

On the Sunday of the potluck, our church high schoolers were gathered here, training for their ministry in Mexicali. My daughter invited our shortstop, who speaks Spanish fluently, to accompany our team to Mexicali, and she accepted. For a whole week she lived in that environment (which was no small school of

prophets), and was drawn into the fellowship of the Spirit in Mexico. I prayed for that young woman all week long. When they returned, I drove to church to pick them up. You can imagine my joy when she ran up to me in the parking lot and hugged me, saying, "Mr. Morgan, I accepted Christ!" On Easter Sunday morning when I joined with all of you to sing the Hallelujah Chorus, I can tell you I had no little emotion. David's magnificent verses from Psalm 34 proved true for me on that resurrection morning:

*"O magnify the LORD with me,
And let us exalt His name together.
I sought the LORD, and He answered me,
And delivered me from all my fears,
They looked to Him and were radiant,
And their faces shall never be ashamed."* (Ps 34:3-5)

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