GENESIS ROAD PRESENTS...

a look at the picture of God
in every chapter of
the 9th book of the Bible

Chapter 1

GOD CARES ABOUT THE THINGS THAT MATTER TO US.

In 1 Samuel chapter 1, there is an interesting story of a man with two unhappy wives. Both were blessed in different ways, but neither was happy with their blessings. Instead, they wanted what they didn't have. Hannah, the eventual star of the story, had her husband's heart and affections. Whenever the family was dining together at the temple, Elkanah gave Hannah "a double portion because he loved her." (vs 5) He showed this affection to her even though she was barren. Of course, Hannah was distraught over the fact that she had no children. For women of that time, a childless existence was usually accompanied with feelings of shame and guilt.

Peninnah, on the other hand, was the baby-maker. The description of the family meals at the temple included this little detail: "He would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters." (vs 4) Peninnah hadn't just managed to give Elkanah one or two children. She had lavished an entire future family line on him. In the eyes of society, she would have been seen as the greater of the two women. And many scholars agree that Elkanah likely married Hannah first (because he loved her so much) . . . and subsequently married Peninnah in order to have a family.

From the perspective of Old Testament Israel, with all the priority it placed on children and family, Peninnah had it made. She had given her husband what Hannah couldn't. She was the superstar. But she sure wasn't acting like a superstar. Every year, when the family went to the temple to worship and sacrifice, an awful thing happened: "Because the Lord had closed [Hannah's] womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat." (vs 6-7)

Wasn't it bad enough that Hannah was unable to bear children? Why would Peninnah—who had given her husband plenty of children—feel the need to rub it in Hannah's face so horribly? The obvious answer is that Hannah had something Peninnah wanted and didn't have.

That's rather ironic, isn't it? Peninnah had something Hannah wanted and didn't have—children. And Hannah had something Peninnah wanted and didn't have—Elkanah's love and affection. Remember, these taunting episodes happened during the family's yearly trip to the temple. It was there that Peninnah witnessed Hannah being given double portions of the best meat, a tender gesture that wasn't given to either her or her children. That must have been painful for her. So, here are two women who are finding it hard to live with their lot in life. They are both blessed, but neither seems to be content with their blessing. They both want something else.

And that's when we see something wonderful about God! That He cares about the things that matter *to us*. Big things, little things, trivial things, significant things. He cares about them all. He cares about *them* because He cares about *us*.

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I suppose God could have approached Hannah the way her husband did. When she got so upset that she "wept and would not eat," Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (vs 8) These were reasonable questions, and I'm sure Elkanah asked them in a kind way. Let's face it. He was a man, and I'm sure he really wanted to "fix" Hannah's problem. He didn't want her to feel awful. But, as reasonable a response as that might have been, God didn't come to Hannah and say, "Hey, why can't you just be grateful for what you have in life? Your husband loves you. He showers affection on you even in the presence of his other wife and your step-children. Can't you just be thankful for his love and not want what you don't have?"

Likewise, He didn't approach Peninnah and say, "Hey, why can't you just be grateful for what you have in life? You may want the attention Hannah's getting, but look at all the kids you have. She would die to have that many children! Can't you just be thankful and proud of the family you've built with Elkanah?" No, God didn't approach either woman that way. Instead, He cared about the things that mattered to them. And He remembered them and answered both their prayers.

Have you ever thought about that? Of course, we know He answered Hannah's prayer. It wasn't very long before she was pregnant with Samuel. Having a child was very important to her. It mattered to her, and so it mattered to God, too. But what about Peninnah? After the verses that describe how she taunted and tormented Hannah, she's never mentioned again. It's easy to think that she never found satisfaction. But we can glean a little clue about how God answered her prayer by reading between the Biblical lines just a bit.

Verses 21-22 say this: "When the man Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the Lord and to fulfill his vow, Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, 'After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always.'" So Hannah *remained at home with Samuel* until he was weaned. Here's the thing: in Biblical times, babies were not commonly weaned until after the age of three. Until then, they were totally dependent upon their mother's breastfeeding. That means, then, that for three years, Hannah stayed home with Samuel while the rest of Elkanah's family journeyed to the temple.

Thus, for three years, Peninnah *had Elkanah all to herself* during those special trips. Before, this had been the trip that caused all the angst between the women. For Peninnah saw Elkanah treating Hannah with special attention and affection at the temple meals, and it irritated her. It was a constant reminder to her that Elkanah loved Hannah more than her. But, for the three years Hannah remained at home with Samuel, Peninnah enjoyed time at the temple with Elkanah and their children. All of them together, without Hannah.

In the end, both women received what they wanted for three years. Hannah had a son and Peninnah had special time with Elkanah. God found a way to give them what mattered to them, because they mattered to Him. And God is no different today. He cares about what we care about. Big things, small things, it doesn't matter. He cares about the things that matter *to us* because we matter *to Him*.

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Chapter 2

GOD JUDGES US.

I thought I would take a piece of Hannah's prayer and use it as an opportunity to talk a little bit about what it means for God to judge us. This comes from verse 3: "I can tell those proud people, 'Stop your boasting! Nothing is hidden from the Lord, and he judges what we do.'"

The idea of God as judge is, of course, something that is prevalent in Christian theology. And it's a theme that runs throughout the Bible. It's interesting, then, that Jesus said, "If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, *I do not judge that person*. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world." (Jn 12:47)

I think the problem comes with our ideas about what God's judging entails. Most of us think of God sitting in His big judge's chair—much like a judge presides over a courtroom in America. That includes the judge (or sometimes a jury) making a *determination* as to guilt or innocence. Pronouncing a verdict. Meting out a sentence.

But I don't think that's what it means for God to be the judge. We're not guilty because *He says* we're guilty. We're not innocent because *He says* we're innocent. We are either guilty or innocent because *that's what we are*. And since God deals in reality, He is in the business of *revealing* what is so.

Let me use an analogy. I grind my teeth. I have, apparently, done this for a long time in my sleep—long before I was aware of it. In fact, it is such a problem for me that I have a hairline fracture in one of my teeth that will get worse if I don't continue to address the problem. Several years ago, my dentist suggested that I wear a bite guard at night. This is a piece of thick plastic that has been precisely molded to fit my upper teeth. I "snap" it in place at night, and it provides a barrier between my top and bottom teeth so I can't injure them when I clench my jaw.

That bite guard has judged me! If you turn it over, you will find deep, *deep* grooves in the thick plastic where my bottom teeth have been grinding against the underside. And, just like that, I have been judged guilty of grinding my teeth. But that bite guard didn't do anything to me. It didn't have to pronounce a sentence. Instead, it simply revealed what had been unseen up to that point. It revealed the reality of what happens in my mouth at night.

That's how God judges us. He is holy, and everything He does is right. He is pure truth, and how we respond to Him will reveal what has been unseen up to that point. That's why Jesus continued in John 12 to say this: "There *is* a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; *the very words I have spoken will condemn them* at the last day."

God doesn't *have* to condemn anyone, and He's not in the business of condemning anyone. Just like my bite guard, God judges us by revealing what is true about us. And if we are condemned, it will be because we have condemned ourselves. The up side of all of this is that God doesn't wait until

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some climactic moment at the end of time to suddenly reveal that we are guilty (or innocent). Because He is eager to save *everyone,* He is constantly revealing to us the condition of our hearts. He is constantly diagnosing our hopeless condition so that we will come to Him—Judge, Physician, Friend—for the remedy.

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Chapter 3

GOD WANTS TO SPEAK.

Have you ever had something really exciting or really sad happen to you . . . and you just wanted to tell someone? And, at a time like that, have you ever tried to call your friends and family—person after person—and just kept getting sent to voice-mail? I had that happen to me once, and it was so frustrating!

I think God is like that. I think He's just dying to talk to us, but most of the time, we can't be bothered to listen. Maybe we're just too busy. Maybe we're too busy *talking* at *Him.* Maybe we've been working hard to drown out the voice of the Spirit for too long. No matter which one, I think God would just like to get a word in edgewise.

The reason I think that is because of what God does in 1 Samuel 3. Mainly, He wastes no time. The nation of Israel is in spiritual shambles; it seems that most people don't remember or even care that God exists. As the chapter put it, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." (vs 1) But finally, *finally,* God had someone willing to listen. A *child.*

That was it. That was all God had to work with. But we see that He wasted no time. Once He found an open ear, He started talking! And thankfully, once Samuel heard the voice of the Lord, he never stopped listening. But it makes me wonder—what would God like to say to you and me? He wants to speak. He's *dying* to speak. And when He finds a willing heart, He *will* speak!

Anyone listening?

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Chapter 4

GOD IS NOT A LEGALIST.

I found something in this chapter very interesting. It opens with the Israelites going to war against the Philistines. It didn't go well. Thousands of Israelites were killed in the battle, and when they got back home, they wondered why they had met with such defeat. As a result, they decided that they would carry the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them the next time.

So (without consulting God, of course), they went to Shiloh and got the Ark. Then, they went to fight the Philistines again. But their "good luck charm" didn't bring them victory. Instead, they lost almost *eight times* as many soldiers as they had before. Not only that, but the Ark was stolen by the Philistines and taken off into captivity.

For me, the interesting thing was remembering the instructions given in Joshua 6—that in conquering the Promised Land, the Israelites were to carry the Ark of the Covenant before them into battle. They did this when they surrounded and overtook the city of Jericho. So, perhaps the Israelites were remembering those battle instructions. But . . . I doubt it. This was the generation described just a chapter ago as one in which no one was listening to the voice of God.

The Israelites were trying to use God to get what they wanted. And that didn't work out so well for them.

So, this made me think about how God is *not* a legalist. If He was, He would have looked at the Israelites carrying the Ark into battle and said, "Well, I told them that carrying the Ark would give them the victory . . . so, I guess they must prevail today." No, with God, it's not *what you do,* but *why you do it.*

It's just like when the Pharisees put Jesus on the cross and wanted to break His legs so He would hurry up and die and they could get home quick to keep the Sabbath. I mean, does it really matter if you're "keeping the Sabbath" if you've just killed God? In that case, it didn't matter what they were doing so much as *why* they were doing it.

Now, I'm not trying to say that what we do doesn't matter at all. The choices we make have consequences that affect us. But when it comes to our salvation, God doesn't care if we're keeping track of items on a checklist. He cares about the condition of our *hearts.* Are we willing to listen to Him? Are we willing to take direction? Are we willing to respond when He corrects us? If we are in a *teachable* attitude, it really doesn't matter what we do, for God is willing to take us where we are and work with us to bring us to where we need to be. He's not keeping a ledger of our behavior marked with credits and debits. He's not a legalist!

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Chapter 5

GOD HAS A SENSE OF HUMOR.

This has got to be one of my all-time favorite chapters in the Bible. I think it's hilarious. You'll remember from the last chapter that the Philistines whooped the Israelites in battle, captured the Ark of the Covenant, and carried it off back to their land. The first thing they did was put it in the temple of their own god, Dagon. (Dagon was a man-fish idol.)

When the people of the city came into the temple the next day, they found Dagon face-down on the ground in front of the Ark of the Covenant. Ha! The Philistines had to prop him back up in his place. But he didn't stay there for long. The next day, they came back, and not only was he back on the ground in front of the Ark, but his head and hands had been broken off and were lying some distance away on the threshold.

Needless to say, the Philistines were pretty mad: "When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, 'The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon our god.'" (vs 7) In other words, *This God is beating up our god—and in his own temple! We gotta get Him outta here!*

You can't tell me that God doesn't have a sense of humor. Not even in the Philistine temple for 24 hours, and God is making Dagon bow down to Him. Even a good "propping up" couldn't keep Dagon upright. And if I have just one prayer today, it's that God deal with the idols in my life in such a straightforward, unorthodox way!

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Chapter 6

GOD IS AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR.

Well, just when you thought nobody was paying attention to God . . . along comes 1 Samuel 6. Up to this point, God has had more failure with Israel than success (or so it seems). Here and there, He has a person who appears willing to listen, but those people are few and far between. It could almost make you think that God isn't very good at getting His point across.

But then we come to verse 6: "Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When Israel's god dealt harshly with them, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?" These were the Philistine priests talking to the Philistines about sending back the Ark of the Covenant to the Israelites. And one thing's for sure: Israel might have quickly forgotten what God did in Egypt, *but the Philistines hadn't*. They got the message, and they were still talking about it decades later!

To me, this proves that God is an effective communicator—regardless of whether we choose to listen to His message or not. We may be stubborn and unwilling to yield to Him, but that doesn't mean He has failed to get His point across. *Whatever* we need to know, God is more than capable of communicating it to us!

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Chapter 7

GOD WILL ALWAYS TAKE YOU BACK.

What a beautiful message in 1 Samuel 7. Here, we see God as the universal Lover, taking back His wayward people yet again, opening His arms to His prodigal son one more time.

"Then all the people of Israel turned back to the Lord. So Samuel said to all the Israelites, 'If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.' So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only . . . Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him." (vs 2-4, 9)

So, just a simple question today: What, exactly, can we do to make God *reject* us when we try to come back home? And there is a simple answer for this simple question: *Nothing*. There is absolutely nothing we can do to make God reject us. If we run away from home 500 times and return 500 times, He will welcome us with open arms 500 times.

I wish more Christians understood this and lived it and preached it! The danger with sin is not that God will reject *us,* but that *we* will ultimately reject *Him*. The danger with sin is not that God won't welcome us home, but that we might get to the place where we will never go home again.

It really doesn't matter what we've done. It really doesn't matter how long we've been away from home. It really doesn't matter how far we have gone. If we are willing to go home, we will find a Father who is eager to throw a party for us. If we will turn back, we will find a Father who runs out to meet us on the road. We will find a God who has been longing for us to return since the moment we left.

He holds no grudges. He seeks no revenge. He will *always* take you back.

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Chapter 8

GOD BELIEVES IN SELF-GOVERNMENT.

Talking about politics these days can ruffle a few feathers, so it's a topic I try to stay away from on the blog. (Besides, this isn't a blog about politics. It's a blog about God.) However, I couldn't help but notice what I believe is an important (albeit politically-related) lesson about 1 Samuel 8.

In this chapter, the people decided they were ready for a king. They wanted to be like all the other nations around them—with a central government and a strong, strapping figurehead who would lead them into battle in order to conquer the nations around them. Ironically, they made this request of Samuel because his own sons (to whom he had passed the reins) were thoroughly corrupt and not doing such a great job as the judges of Israel.

When Samuel consulted with God about the whole "king" idea, God expressed a feeling of *rejection*. "Listen to all that the people are saying to you," He told Samuel. "It is not you they have rejected, but *they have rejected me* as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights." (vs 7-9)

When I read this, I realized that it wasn't in God's plan for Israel to have a central government that would rule over them. The plan was for individual tribes to engage in *self-government*. In fact, God *warned* the people about what would happen if they insisted on setting themselves under the authority of a central government:

- Their sons would be drafted into civil service and the army.
- Their daughters would be enlisted into domestic service.
- They would be deprived of their best resources.
- They would be taxed on their income.

Hmmm. Does that sound familiar? Somehow, we always expect that governments will be moral, fair, impartial, and upright. But governments are run by *people,* and on this planet, *people* are the problem. (That's why those Communist utopias which are supposed to provide care for everyone end with dictators living in lavish palaces while their countrymen starve.) God never intended for us to be ruled or governed by another authority; He always intended for us to be self-governed. It works the same way in His spiritual kingdom. That's why you'll remember that one of the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22 is *self-control.* I hear a lot of Christians say they want God to take control of them. *God doesn't want to take control!* He wants *you* to be in control—of yourself!

God doesn't run the universe like a Nanny State, and I don't believe He intends for us to live in one either. However (to use America as an example), the further individual hearts stray from God in society, the more we feel the need to multiply government regulation and interference. We unconsciously reach out for external limits and restric-

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tions because we have rejected the self-government that can only be found when God is at the center of our lives.

And if there's anything we can learn from the Gospels, it's that multiplying rules and regulations does *nothing* to change the human heart or the circumstances of life. Instead, it lands the people under a heavy, oppressive burden from which they need liberation. God provides that freedom within *His* model of government. As He changes us from the inside out, we will find ourselves free—free from the tyranny of government and free from the tyranny of our past selfish desires. Free to enjoy God's plan of self-government.

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Chapter 9

GOD MAKES DIVINE APPOINTMENTS.

I can honestly say that in all the times I've read the Bible through, I don't remember ever reading this story before. I mean, I know I must have, but it was apparently one of those things that got filed away in one of my more dusty brain corners. But boy, did it ever get my attention today!

I *loved* this story—God used some donkeys to set up a meeting between His man (Samuel) and the future king of Israel (Saul). As the drama unfolds in the chapter, Saul goes with one of his father's servants to look for some lost donkeys. After being gone for a long time, Saul begins to worry that *they* will become the lost ones and suggests they turn around and go home. But the servant remembers that there is (conveniently!) a "man of God" in the town they've stopped at and suggests that they find him and ask him where to look for the donkeys.

At first, Saul is skeptical. He's worried that they don't have anything to give to the prophet. He's worried that they will run out of food. But the servant convinces him, and they go. When they enter the town, they ask the first man they see where they can find the prophet. Of course, this man turns out to be Samuel, and God has already filled him in on all His plans regarding Saul.

My favorite part of the story is Samuel's response to Saul's question, *Would you please tell me where the seer's house is?* Samuel said, "I am the seer. Go up ahead of me to the high place, for today you are to eat with me, and in the morning I will send you on your way and will tell you all that is in your heart. As for the donkeys you lost three days ago, do not worry about them; they have been found." (vs 19-20) *I love it!* Saul never even gets a chance to ask about the donkeys before Samuel says, "Don't worry about that. Problem solved."

Saul was just focused on the donkeys, but all the while, God had much bigger and more important things in mind. So, as I'm reading this, the famous words of Jesus (which He used so often after parables) came to mind: *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.* And, hopefully, what we hear God saying is, *Hey you! What are you so worried about? Would you relax already?! I've got things under control.*

God is in the business of making divine appointments. And He doesn't need our help to make them or carry them out! Usually, what He needs is for us to stop worrying or stop trying to *make* something happen when it's outside of His timeline. So don't worry. You don't need to have a gift for the prophet. And yes, He has found your lost donkeys. If you're going to worry about anything today, worry about keeping your eyes open to see *Him* and the appointments He has made for you!

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Chapter 10

GOD ALWAYS GIVES CONFIRMATION.

One of the things I love most about God is that He never just asks us to take His word for anything. He always backs it up with evidence. He always provides confirmation. And most of the time, He doesn't provide just *one* type of confirmation either. He gives evidence both to us and those around us.

1 Samuel 10 is a great example of that. At the very beginning of this chapter, Saul was anointed as king. There, it was done! Israel had a king. God had chosen His man. He had spoken, Samuel had listened and obeyed, and *voila!* Long live the king! Except . . . nobody else besides Samuel and Saul knew what had happened. So, that's why I find it interesting that a series of four things happened immediately following Saul's anointing. Two signs for Saul and two signs for Israel. These would confirm in the minds of Saul and the Israelites what God had done.

1. Saul was going to meet two men near Rachel's tomb who would confirm that the lost donkeys had been found.
2. Saul would meet three men under the great tree of Tabor, and one of them would give Saul two loaves of bread.
3. Saul would meet a procession of prophets coming from Gibeah and would begin to prophesy with them.
4. By the casting of lots, Saul was "chosen" to be Israel's king.

I love how the first two events were just for Saul. They would confirm *to him* that God had chosen him to be king . . . but if anyone passing by witnessed either event, they wouldn't think anything of it. One was a simple conversation, and the other, an offer of bread. Big deal. However, once Saul's personal experience had been confirmed, God would also reveal the choice He had made *to all of Israel*—beginning with Saul's prophesying (which caused quite a stir among the Israelites) and culminating in the lot-casting process.

This once again served to remind me that God is not the author of confusion. He doesn't leave us wondering about what's going on. Nor does He ask us to believe *His own word* without independent confirmation. Rather, God is in the business of *conviction.* He will make sure that we have all the evidence we need to believe what He says. Thus, we are never left in the dark. He communicates with us and *then* provides confirmation of His plan. And (at least for me) this is what brings me complete peace and assurance in trusting His will for my life.

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Chapter 11

GOD IS NOT A SORE LOSER.

You know, it's hard not to think of David when we read about Saul. Knowing how the story is going to unfold, and knowing that it's *David* (not Saul) who was eventually called "a man after God's own heart," it is hard for me to let Saul's story just be Saul's story. Somehow, it always just feels like the prolonged prelude to the story of David. And, in many ways, perhaps it is.

However, from 1 Samuel 11, it is clear that Saul was a *good* king—at least he started out that way. He certainly gave Israel a decisive victory over the Ammonites (something *they* were concerned about). But I was really struck by what happened at the end of the chapter, when some of Saul's subjects inquired as to what should be done about those who had been critical of Saul's appointment: "The people then said to Samuel, 'Who was it that asked, "Shall Saul reign over us?" Turn these men over to us so that we may put them to death.' But Saul said, 'No one will be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued Israel.'" (vs 12-13)

Wow, talk about a man after God's own heart! Here, Saul was demonstrating the unwillingness to destroy people who had talked openly against him. At least at first, he started out as a man who would forgive his enemies, not use his power and position to force people to follow him.

To me, this says that, in choosing a first king for Israel, *God really chose a good man.* To us, this might seem surprising, since God was definitely *unhappy* about the course Israel chose for themselves. He didn't want them to have a king. In fact, back in 1 Samuel 8, He described it as a *personal rejection.* So, God had been dumped by His people, but instead of retaliating against them and finding some awful, terrible ogre to make their lives miserable, He gave them the *very best* that was available.

(I'm not sure I would have been that gracious. After being dumped but still in the position of choosing a king, I might have said, "Okay guys, you want a king? Oh, I'll give you a king alright. I'll make sure you'll be sorry you ever asked for one!")

Unfortunately, in the lives of both Saul and David, history bore out the fact that power and position are often corrupting influences too strong to resist. And both kings—although David's heart remained fundamentally true to the Lord—engaged in their fair share of power abuse. However, in acquiescing to the demands of Israel for a king, *God proved that He is not a sore loser.* When He doesn't get His way, when He doesn't get what *He* wants, He still works to bring us the very best He can under the circumstances.

No matter what we choose, He is always trying to bless us.

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Chapter 12

GOD DISSOLVES SIN.

Out of this whole chapter, there was one verse that jumped out at me. As Samuel was giving his farewell address to the Israelites, they began to lament over the new evil they had done—asking for a king. In response to their distress, "Samuel answered, 'Don't be afraid. It's true that you have sinned, but don't turn away from the Lord. Serve the Lord with all your heart.'" (vs 20)

Yes, you are a sinner, but cling to God. The problem with our sin is *not* that it makes God run away from us, but that it makes *us* want to run away from God. From the experience of Adam and Eve, we can see that sin *immediately* produced fear and guilt—causing them to feel uncomfortable in God's presence; thus, they hid in order to avoid Him. That's why the prevailing message of Scripture is *Do Not Be Afraid.* Samuel even said it in the verse I quoted. If God can deal with our fear and convince us to stay in His presence, He can and will dissolve our sin.

Mark these words: *Nothing* is stronger than the power of God's presence. We may be clinging tenaciously to sin with one hand, but if we will *also* cling tenaciously *to God* with our other hand, the power of His presence *will* drive our sin away. There is no other choice. Sin *cannot* exist in God's presence. If we are determined to stick with Him no matter what, our sin will ultimately *have* to yield to Him.

So, heed the words of Samuel today. Even though you have sinned and even though you may continue to sin, cling stubbornly to God. Do not be afraid. Refuse to let Him go, and He *will* dissolve your sin.

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Chapter 13

GOD CANNOT BE MANIPULATED.

Did you know that God sometimes gets treated like a god? That's exactly what Saul was doing in 1 Samuel 13. Somehow, in his mind, Saul had reduced God to an item on a checklist, a thing to be manipulated. And that thinking got him into a lot of trouble.

At first, when I read this chapter, I thought it was just a little bit harsh that Saul should lose the kingship *forever* because he jumped the gun and offered sacrifices to the Lord. That was Samuel's job, but Saul got tired of waiting and did it for him. When Samuel asked him why he had committed this violation of the Lord's command, Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Mikmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.'" (vs 11-12)

Apparently, Saul knew that he should wait for Samuel, but Saul wasn't thinking about that. Saul was thinking about going into battle, and in his mind, he believed that one of the items on his prewar checklist was offering sacrifices to God so God would be with him. In other words, he had stopped thinking of God as a Person and started thinking of Him as an object to be manipulated.

And God cannot be manipulated.

J.B. Phillips once wrote a book called *Your God is Too Small*. It is about our tendency to want to put God into any number of various boxes. It is about our inclination to turn God into a god, an object to be manipulated and controlled. Talk about playing with fire! We are treading on thin ice whenever we attempt to manage God, for we are creatures, and the creatures can never manage the Creator. God is much too big to be a god. He is much too big to fit into any size box we try to stuff Him into.

Time and again throughout Scripture, God has broken out of the molds we try to place Him in. He has shattered every expectation we have for how a god should think and behave. In fact, it was He who summed it up most eloquently when He said, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isa 55:9)

In this chapter, much to his dismay, Saul discovered that God cannot be reduced to an object. He cannot be manipulated into acting the way *we* want Him to act. And thank God for that.

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Chapter 14

GOD IS THE AUTHOR OF REASON.

It's a little disheartening to see what happened to Saul the further he traveled from the Lord's plans. He began his kingship as a virtuous man, one who wouldn't make a decree to destroy those who had spoken against him. But, not too far down the road, he bound his army under an oath, saying, "Cursed be anyone who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!" (vs 24) He had obviously had a change of heart regarding revenge.

Thus, in this chapter, we see Saul forcing his soldiers into a ridiculous oath. Then, he is distressed when (after building his *first ever* altar to the Lord) he doesn't receive an answer from God as to the continuing war with the Philistines. Immediately, Saul decides that there must be a sinner in the camp. *But he is too blind to see that it is him.* In the previous chapter, he was just rebuked by Samuel for his unfaithfulness to God and told, because of it, that the kingship would be taken away from him. And he's wondering who hasn't been true to the Lord?

In contrast to Saul is Jonathan, who trusted implicitly in God and thus delivered the Israelites from the Philistines at Gibeah.

Simply put, *God* is the author of reason. And the further we go from Him, the more irrational and blind we become. If we continue along that course, we will find ourselves unable to think straight and even unable to see what's staring us right in the face. It makes me think of the time Jesus had to tell the Pharisees, "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matt 7:5)

Without God, we become unreasonable, blind hypocrites. We may think we're making sense, but without Him, it's impossible. And in time, we will reveal ourselves to be fools. He alone is the author of reason.

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Chapter 15

GOD PREFERS RIGHT TO RITE.

I decided to go with the "softer" title for this blog. My first choice was *God doesn't care about your "good deeds."* This was what Saul learned in 1 Samuel 15. He expressly disobeyed God's command when he went into battle with the Amalekites. Nobody was to be taken alive, and everything that belonged to the Amalekites was to be destroyed.

But Saul didn't listen to the Lord. Oh, he put everyone to the sword all right. Everyone except King Agag, that is. He took him as a prisoner of war, perhaps to gloat or maybe to torture him for a while. Who knows. And in addition to this, the army plundered everything that was "good"—the sheep, cattle, and lambs. They kept the choicest of everything for themselves.

When Samuel came to meet Saul (knowing that he had violated the Lord's command), I *love* his answer to Saul's declaration that he had carried out all the Lord's instructions: "But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?'" (vs 14) But Saul was adamant that he had obeyed the Lord, saying that he had simply brought the animals back from battle in order to make sacrifices to God. (I think, in his mind, he thought that's what would make God less angry.)

"And Samuel said:
Do you think all God wants are sacrifices—empty rituals just for show?
He wants you *to listen* to him!
Plain listening is the thing,
not staging a lavish religious production.
Not doing what God tells you
is far worse than fooling around in the occult.
Getting self-important around God
is far worse than making deals with your dead ancestors." (vs 22-23)

God always tells us the right thing to do. And if we are unwilling to listen and do what is right, God doesn't care how many *rites* we try to put in place of our obedience. God doesn't want our sacrifices; He doesn't want our good deeds; He doesn't want our empty worship. He wants *us.* And if a willing, surrendered heart isn't part of what we bring to Him, then *nothing else matters.*

Do you think all God wants are sacrifices?
He wants you *to listen* to him!
Forget about the rite. Do the right!

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Chapter 16

GOD IS ON THE MOVE.

I just love it when the Bible hauls off and slaps me upside the head. This was one of those chapters. I read the whole thing, of course, recognizing the most famous verse along the way—"People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (vs 7) But, mentally, I never really got past verse one. It hit me right between the eyes the second I read it:

"The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way!'"

Realizing that God stands outside of linear time, I have often wondered exactly how He experiences *our* linear time. I don't even know if He thinks of time in concepts like *past* and *future*. Both are terms related to linear time, and He is beyond that. However, I think it can be said that, when it comes to His dealings with us in our time, He is always on the move.

God is a mover and a shaker. Always advancing, always progressing, always moving ahead. I don't think He ever gets stuck in the past. I don't think He sits around and pines for the future. I think He is *now,* in the moment, present—*especially* when it comes to His dealings with us in our time. That's because the only time *we* can experience God is *in the present moment*. We can't interact with Him in our past. We can't communicate with Him in our future. All we have with Him is this moment.

And here is God saying to Samuel, *How long will you stay fixated on what's in the past? Get up and get going! We're moving, here!* And it was just as if God was saying those words to me. *Won't you quit obsessing over your past sins? I've forgiven them. Won't you stop reliving your past mistakes? I've forgotten them. Here I am—in this moment! Today, there are new horizons. Come with Me!*

I don't know about you, but I don't want to be left behind on the road. God is on the move, and I want to go with Him! I may not know where we're going (actually, I might be scared if I knew). I may get tired sometimes (are we there yet?). But I don't want to get caught like Lot's wife, looking back at what used to be, when God is with me *in this moment*.

It really doesn't matter what happened to yesterday's plan. And it really doesn't matter what tomorrow's plan might hold. What matters is that God has plans for this day, this hour, this moment. Are you ready to go?

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Chapter 17

GOD IS WORTH DYING FOR.

I never tire of reading the story of David and Goliath. I try to imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites to watch this ten-foot-tall giant come out and mock them every day. None of them would go out to fight him—not even their strongest, tallest warrior. Their faith in God was weak, if not non-existent.

Not even the allure of a happy, comfortable life could entice the Israelites to confront Goliath. Saul promised to give immense wealth, a princess in marriage, and exemption from taxes *(forever!)* to the man who defeated Goliath. That prize package would be at least worth trying for, wouldn't it? Apparently not.

Then along comes David. And he doesn't think the prize package is worth trying for, but he *does* know something that's worth dying for. And he can't believe that Israel's soldiers are cowering in fear when God Almighty is their God: "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" he asked the men standing around him. (vs 26)

David didn't hesitate. He knew that what was happening wasn't right, and he was determined to do something about it. His brother tried to send him home, but he wouldn't listen. Saul tried to dress him up in some heavy armor, but he wouldn't wear it. In his heart, he knew that if he went against Goliath with trust in God as his weapon, he would prevail.

Of course, we all know that David did prevail. However, even if he hadn't, *God is worth dying for*. There is no greater honor in this life than to give ourselves to Him completely—heart, soul, and body. Often, though, we may tend to be more like those Israelites who shrank away from Goliath. When we encounter things or people who disparage God, are we swift to come to His defense, or do we shrink off into the corner?

There is nothing to be afraid of. We can afford to stand up for God. As David said, we know that though He does not save by spear or sword, the battle is His. (vs 47) And no matter what happens to us when we go up against Goliath, we can put our full confidence in Him. He is worthy of our whole heart, our life, and even our death. We can place it all, as David did, in His hands.

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Chapter 18

GOD TAMES THE WILD HEART.

What a great contrast in this chapter—of what men are like with and without God. By this time, Saul was obviously aware that God was with David: "Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was *with* David but had *departed* from Saul." (vs 12) Furthermore, because God was with David, he had success in everything he did. The more Saul tried to derail his success (and even end his life), the more David flourished.

As the chapter went on, Saul became increasingly paranoid and unreasonable. After being angry about the victory song the Israelite women were singing, Saul graduated to trying to kill David; then, he decided to let war do his dirty work for him and sent David into dangerous battles instead. When that didn't work, he thought that distracting him with a beautiful woman would help throw him off his game and, in the meantime, asked for David to kill (and circumcise) 100 Philistines as a wedding gift. David killed 200 instead.

At the end of the chapter, it said, "When Saul realized that the Lord was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy the rest of his days." (vs 28-29) What I thought was interesting was the difference between Saul and David. When a man has separated himself from God, he becomes envious, suspicious, quick-tempered, and dangerous. David, on the other hand, was ever ready to serve Saul—even as he was dodging Saul's spear!

Without God, there is no way to tame our wild hearts. He alone has the power to transform us from a "Saul" into a "David"—if we are willing to let Him. No character flaw is too formidable for the power of His Spirit. He alone can tame the wild heart. When He is "with us," we will be changed. When we have separated ourselves from Him, look out!

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Chapter 19

GOD CANNOT ALWAYS CURE BLINDNESS.

As I read this chapter, I couldn't help but think about how absolutely *blind* Saul was—especially as we got down to the very end. David had fled to Ramah (where Samuel was), and Saul sent a group of men to capture him and bring him back for execution. But, the first group of men got to Ramah and got sidetracked by God's Spirit. So Saul sent a second group of men to capture David, and they also got detoured by the Spirit. Saul sent a *third* group of men to get David, and they *too* were held up by the Spirit.

Finally, Saul had had enough of other men failing at his job, so he went to get David himself. And *even he* got caught up by the Spirit of the Lord and was completely unable to accomplish his goal. By this time, how could Saul have possibly *not* known that David was under God's direct protection? How could he have been so blind?

Ah, the power of the sinful human heart.

Last week, I read the story of Jesus healing the man born blind in Mark, chapter 8. In order to cure his blindness, Jesus simply spit on the man's eyes and placed his hands on them. "Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." (Mk 8:25)

Physical blindness is so easy for God to cure. But *spiritual* blindness is *impossible* for God to cure without our consent. God could cure the man in Mark 8, but He couldn't cure Saul as long as Saul continued to persist in his rebellion. And the same is true for us. God can cure *every* kind of blindness except the kind we willingly and persistently hold onto.

What incredible things it says about God that His power is exercised in such a way as to be *limited* by the choices *we* make. He truly values nothing more than our freedom, and if we are hell-bent on staying blind, He won't cure us against our will.

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Chapter 20

GOD IS LIFE.

So, I've been thinking a lot about death lately. I know several dear people who are struggling with illness, and I have several friends who have just lost someone they loved. And the two-year anniversary of my own father's death is coming up next month. I will never forget the final moments of his life—sitting beside him, rubbing his feet and legs while he took his last breaths.

Even as I'm writing this, though, I am so frustrated because I think we use the words *life* and *death* in such a shallow, wrong way. We refer to them both as a description of their relation to respiration. If you're breathing, you're alive. If you're not breathing, you're dead. I think the Bible tells a different story, though. Ultimately, I don't think true life or true death are fundamentally about breathing. I don't think what we call "death" here on Earth is actually death (the kind God is worried about). And I don't think that what we call "life" here on Earth is actually life (the kind God offers).

Having made that disclaimer, however, I have to say that delving into *that* is for another blog at another time. Today, I will actually address what we all call "death" on this planet—or, as I like to refer to it, *going to sleep*. That thing that happens when we stop breathing.

At the risk of sounding morbid, don't you know that you are—*right this moment*—living under a death sentence? You, yes *you,* are going to die. You don't know where. You don't know when. You may not know what your cause of death will be yet. But that death that we all like to pretend doesn't really exist and won't happen to us *is going to happen to you*.

In fact, death is about the *only* thing you can count on in this life! Nothing else is so guaranteed. Nothing else is so firmly and stubbornly fixed at a rate of one-hundred-percent. If you are born, you will die. So why are we still so *surprised* by it? When the doctor gives us the diagnosis, when we get the call that a friend has been killed in an accident, when we suffer a miscarriage or a stillbirth, why are we shocked? I understand grief and sadness, but surprise?

I think it was all this thinking about death that made David's words to Jonathan jump out at me today: "Your father knows very well that I have found favor in your eyes, and he has said to himself, 'Jonathan must not know this or he will be grieved.' Yet as surely as the Lord lives and as you live, *there is only a step between me and death*." (vs 3) Of course, David was referring to a very specific and real threat to his life at that moment. However, there is something real and profound in his words.

There is only a step between me and death. All the time. Every day.

I recently wrote this on my Facebook status: "Today isn't the first day of the rest of your life. Today *is* the rest of your life." And one of my friends responded: "I hope not. I'd hate to have it end that soon." Regardless, I am sticking by what I

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wrote, because I believe it's true. Today is the rest of your life, because *today* is all we ever have. You can't live in yesterday, and you will *never* live in tomorrow. Today, *this* day, is it. Maybe that's why God says *today* is the day of salvation. (2 Cor 6:2) We, all of us, can only live one day at a time.

However, here's where my initial disclaimer comes in. God is life, *true* and abundant life. And when we die, our life is still secure—exactly in the same place it was before we closed our eyes and stopped breathing. Life is and has always been *only* in God. He has chosen to share that life with us, but nobody else has ever been (nor will ever be) able to claim, "I am the way, the truth, *and the life*." (Jn 14:6)

And the exciting thing is that we don't have to wait for *that* life. If we have God, we have it *now,* whether we are awake or asleep. As John said, "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son *has life;* whoever does not have the Son of God *does not have life*. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know *that you have eternal life*." (1 Jn 5:12-13) Notice, John said *you have* eternal life, not *you will someday have* eternal life. If we know and love God, we have eternal life *now*—a life that will include one brief second of sleep somewhere in time.

So, I hope you will realize today (as David did) that there is only one step between you and death. But don't let that surprise you, and don't let it frighten you either! Your true and abundant life is secure in God, who *is* the life. And He wants you to know that whether you are awake or asleep, you have eternal life—right now—in Him!

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Chapter 21

GOD IS A ROCK.

I have an old choir song rumbling through my head this morning: ♫♪ My God is a rock in a weary land ♪♫ A shelter in the time of storm. ♪♫ Incidentally, these images of God were penned often by David. (One example is found in Psalm 18:2.) How well David must have known and trusted the refuge he found in God, particularly when he was on the run from Saul!

What struck me immediately in this chapter was that David, upon hearing with finality that Saul was bent on destroying him, ran immediately to God. He headed straight for the sanctuary. How beautiful that is, and what an example for us! David could have run to a lot of other places and people, I suppose. Certainly, he still had family. He was a well-known warrior throughout Israel. He could have probably found refuge in a lot of places, but he chose to seek his refuge *in God*.

Our God is a rock. He is a refuge, a fortress, a deliverer. *Nobody* else can provide the things we need like our God can. If we are frightened, He will provide the peace that passes understanding. If we are hungry, He will provide the bread of life. If we are thirsty, He will give us living water. Truly, *whatever* we need, He has it in His hands, and He is more than willing to give it to us.

So, whatever it is you are looking for today, whatever it is you are in need of, or whatever it is you are running from, seek refuge in God. He is the only rock in a weary land! Head straight for His sanctuary, and He will take care of you.

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Chapter 22

GOD IS ALWAYS TRYING TO GET THROUGH TO US.

It is really disheartening to see just how sick and twisted Saul became. How irrational. How unreasonable. And since Ahimelek, the high priest, had helped David (even unwittingly), "the king said, 'You will surely die, Ahimelek, you and your whole family.'" (vs 16) Wow. This is a far cry from the king who refused to hurt those who spoke against him. This a complete 180—the willingness to destroy not only an innocent man, but his entire family as well.

Yet, even though Saul was, by this time, so far gone down the path of rebellion, God was *still* trying to get through to him: "Then the king ordered the guards at his side: 'Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because they too have sided with David. They knew he was fleeing, yet they did not tell me.' But *the king's officials were unwilling to raise a hand to strike the priests* of the Lord." (vs 17

These men defied the king's orders right to his face. That must have floored Saul! At the very least, you might think it would have given him pause to reconsider his actions. *Hmmm . . . perhaps I shouldn't be so eager to strike the priests.* But it didn't seem to faze him at all. He turned right to Doeg (the Edomite) and ordered him to do the dirty work. And he did.

I'm amazed at how God is always trying to get through to us. Even when it seems that we are so far gone, He continues to give us evidence of where we're going wrong. He never stops coming to us. He never stops talking to us. He never stops trying to get through to us!

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Chapter 23

GOD IS NOT IMAGE CONSCIOUS.

So, Saul has pretty much given up the weighty matters of being king and has devoted himself full-time to his new hobby: Trying to kill David. The Philistines were still very much an immediate danger to Israel. In fact, at the beginning of this chapter, it was *David* who saved the people of Keilah from an invasion of the Philistines. But Saul seemed unconcerned with the Philistines and more worried about making sure David wouldn't live much longer.

Once again, this was striking to me, given Jonathan's admission to David in verse 17: "'Don't be afraid,' he said. 'My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. *Even my father Saul knows this.*'" Incredible, isn't it? Just another example of Saul's refusal to acquiesce to what he is *convicted* of.

By this time in the Saul/David saga, it is clear that the Lord is with David. The Lord is guiding him, protecting him, and frustrating Saul's every attempt to kill him. It is also clear that Saul doesn't care very much where the Lord is or what He's doing. Since he knows David will be king, he must know that the Lord has chosen David and that he should stop trying to kill him . . . but it doesn't deter him.

Funny, then, what Saul says to the Ziphites who promise to hand David over to him: "Saul replied, 'The Lord bless you for your concern for me.'" (vs 21) Isn't there just something wrong with that? Saul knows the Lord is not with him in his attempts to get rid of David. And Saul is doing *nothing* in his life to seek God at all, yet he invokes God's name in blessing over those who would help him destroy his enemy.

Maybe saying stuff like that was just a habit for Saul. Or maybe he was still pretending to be God's king to the people (even though he knew otherwise). Still, I think if I was God, I wouldn't let my name be invoked by people who had totally rejected *me* in their life. Actually, it really annoyed me—that Saul would so blatantly thumb his nose at God, but then turn around and "use" Him when it was convenient.

God is obviously not image conscious. There have been (and continue to be) an abundance of "Saul"s throughout history. Hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and religious false advertising are still alive and well today. It amazes me that God doesn't call people out when they misuse His name. It amazes me that He doesn't expose and shame people who only use His name when it suits them. It amazes me that He doesn't defend Himself, doesn't fight back as His name gets drug through the mud.

God prefers to let the evidence do the talking. That's what the Bible is all about—a record of the evidence. Not just what God will *say,* but more importantly what He *does.* And I don't know about you, but to me, the evidence is speaking loud and clear

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Chapter 24

GOD DOES NOT RETALIATE.

In this chapter, we see a beautiful picture of God shining through David, the one who was later called "the man after God's own heart." David has been on the run from Saul for a very long time. Then, suddenly, in a reversal of fortune, Saul enters a cave where David and his men are hiding. David could have easily ambushed Saul; instead, he cut off the corner of his robe. (And even *that* got to his conscience later on.)

After *not* killing Saul, David confronted him outside the cave: "This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the Lord's anointed.'" (vs 10) Incredible, isn't it? David is still referring to Saul as *the Lord's anointed.* Even though David knew God had chosen him to be the next king, he didn't feel the need to take matters into his own hands and "make something happen." He was content to let God make him king in His own time.

Saul had a momentary lapse into contrition at the end of the chapter. Deep down, he knew his problem wasn't with David—and David proved that by not harming him when he had the perfect opportunity. I think it's the same with us and God. If there is an issue between us and God, *God isn't the one with the problem.* And even if we have done great wrong to Him, God does not retaliate. Given the chance, He won't harm us. Instead, as David did with Saul, He will try to reason with us and show us that we have no reason to be afraid of Him.

David had his shortcomings, but in this, he truly was a man after God's own heart. By continuing to treat Saul with graciousness and respect, he revealed the very heart of God as a place where revenge and retaliation do *not* reside.

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Chapter 25

GOD IS A CHARACTER BUILDER.

Some people build skyscrapers. Some people build empires. God builds character.

What jumped out to me in this chapter was David's near-reversal of behavior from the previous chapter. In 1 Samuel 24, David had a chance to kill Saul—someone who was an avowed enemy—and he didn't do it. He showed incredible maturity and restraint, even trying to reason with Saul about things.

In 1 Samuel 24, David showed himself to be patient, forgiving, kind, and level-headed. So, how is it possible that he could act nearly *the opposite* in his very next encounter with an obstinate person? Nabal insults him, and David totally flies off the handle. He tells his 200 mighty men to arm themselves, and they prepare to go and kill every male in sight.

At first, it may seem odd and counter-intuitive. Yet, haven't you ever experienced the same exact thing in your life? In one, specific circumstance, you strive to show great depth of character—and maybe you succeed. And then, on the heels of your "victory," you are confronted with another situation that requires the same strength of character—and you totally blow it? I know I've done that *a lot* in my life. And I always wonder if I'm schizophrenic. How can I act so evenly in one situation and so irrationally in another?

To me, this is all part of God's character-building process. He knows where our weaknesses are, and He provides opportunities for us to flex that character trait (similarly to how one exercises muscle to build it). If you ask God for patience, He will provide many opportunities for you to *practice patience*. If you ask God for a forgiving heart, He will provide many opportunities for you to *practice forgiveness*.

Our God-like character doesn't come to us because God waves His magic character wand and, all of a sudden, we're perfect. It comes through the opportunity to practice building those God-like character traits in a variety of circumstances. Sometimes we succeed beautifully (as David did with Saul). And sometimes we find out that we still have a long way to go (as David did with Nabal). Yet, God doesn't give up on us—and so we shouldn't give up on ourselves. *He* is the master character builder, and if we allow Him to build, He will produce in us a most beautiful, God-reflecting heart.

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Chapter 26

GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF US.

David was God's anointed man for king. The problem? There was already another man in that position. The "logical" thing for David to do would have been to figure out how to get Saul off the throne. After all, as long as Saul was still king, David couldn't assume his rightful position as God's anointed. And I wonder what thoughts and emotions must have run through David's mind as the saga with Saul dragged on and on and *on*.

That's why it was so refreshing to hear David's reply to Abishai (who had offered to kill Saul for him): "'Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the Lord lives,' he said, 'the Lord himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that *I should lay a hand* on the Lord's anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let's go.'" (vs 9-11)

David knew something about God that we need to remember. *He* will take care of us. If He has laid out a plan for our lives, we don't have to go around figuring out how to make it happen. *God* will work things out in His time and in His own way. So often, I think we derail God's best plans for us because we're trying to do His job.

I admire David for *not* doing God's job. I admire him for trusting God to do what He said He was going to do and not getting impatient when it didn't happen immediately.

God has plans for us, and He also knows the best *timing* of those plans. Trust God to take care of you. Trust Him to do what He said He's going to do in your life. Even if it looks like things will never change; even if it looks like those plans will never come to pass, trust God with the business of your life. He will take care of things for you (and better than you could ever do it for yourself).

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Chapter 27

GOD USES IMPERFECT PEOPLE.

Are you imperfect? Great! You're a prime candidate to be used by God! He *loves* to recruit and use imperfect people in His unfolding plan for this Earth. Well, okay, I guess He really doesn't have much of a choice. If He wants to use humans, He will have to settle for imperfect ones. But I suppose He could have chosen to do things without us . . . or made us so we couldn't screw up in the first place (i.e. without freedom). I'm glad God chose to do it the way He did.

So, why all this talk of imperfection? Oh, David. He's like a see-saw. Up one chapter, down the next. I read verse one of this chapter and wondered, *What is David thinking?*

"But David thought to himself, 'One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand.'" (vs 1)

One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. Why in the world would David have thought such a foolish thought? In this blog, I have ragged on Saul for not discerning God's supernatural protection over David . . . but are you telling me that *David* had not discerned it either?! After all he had been through with God, after all the evidences of God's love and protection he had been shown, how could he think that he would eventually fall prey to Saul's evil plans?

The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. It wasn't so long ago that I was writing high praise of David for running *first* to the sanctuary. How had David lost sight of that strategy? Now, instead of escaping to God, he was planning an escape *to the Philistines!* Hmmm . . . running to the *enemy* instead of to God . . . why, *we* would never do that, would we? Seems we're not so different from David, I guess.

But really, the place David went wrong was in the very first phrase of the chapter: *David thought to himself.* Instead of crying out to God, instead of seeking the Lord, he began trying to think up his own solutions. He began to do the very opposite of his actions in the last chapter. The see-saw effect.

What's amazing to me is how God can take such imperfection and use it to craft a wonderful, glorious ending to the story. What hope that gives me! What encouragement! God *likes* imperfect people, and that means He likes me, and that means He likes you. He is willing and ready to use you today. Are you willing to let Him? Don't wait until you're "perfect" to let Him in. Don't worry about screwing up His plans. He's not surprised by our up-and-down cycle of successes and failures. His plans include our imperfections!

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Chapter 28

GOD GIVES US WHAT WE WANT.

I just finished reading Rob Bell's new book, *Love Wins*. It generated a lot of controversy by posing the question of whether or not there is an eternal hell. But the chapter I was most intrigued by was one that asked the question, Does God get what God wants? Bell didn't provide an absolute answer, but he seemed to insinuate that (since God wants everyone to come to a knowledge of salvation) if everyone wasn't saved, God wasn't "great" enough to get what He wants. (At least, that's what I understood him to be saying.)

And I must say that I disagree. Oh, not about the part that God's not great enough to get what He wants. He is and He does. God *absolutely* gets what He wants. But what He wants most is *not* for everyone to be saved. What He wants *most* is for His intelligent creatures to have the freedom to choose for or against Him. In other words, what God *really* wants is for us to get what *we* want.

Unfortunately, Saul got what he wanted. "When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets." (vs 5-6) How come the Lord didn't answer Saul? Was He in a bad mood? Had He stopped talking to Saul? I don't think so. As we have seen time after time, the Lord is *eager* to talk to those who are capable of listening.

But Saul was deaf. He got what he wanted. By his persistent refusal to listen to God, by his stubborn unwillingness to do things any other way but his own way, he eventually got to the place where he was no longer able to hear God's voice. He was deaf.

Is that what God wants? For us to close ourselves off to the point where we can no longer hear Him? Of course not. But if what God wanted *most* was for there to *always* be peace, love, and harmony in the universe with no possibility of rebellion, He could easily have made billions of creatures that would fit the bill.

What God truly wants most, what He has *always* wanted most is love. And that is only possible within the atmosphere of freedom. Our freedom is what He wants most, and that's why He gives us what we want—even when we make choices He doesn't want us to make.

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Chapter 29

GOD IS VISIBLE.

Here's what I liked about this chapter: Just because we screw it up doesn't mean that God's plans have failed. I believe David was in the wrong place doing the wrong things in the events that led up to this chapter. It would seem that he hadn't consulted the Lord about fleeing to the land of the Philistines and that he was living there out of fear, not because he knew that was part of God's plan for his life.

However, even in the midst of doing something that was outside the bounds of God's plan for him, David was still shining for the Lord. The Lord was *still* making Himself known through David so that He was visible to the Philistines. "Achish called David and said to him, '*As surely as the Lord lives,* you have been reliable, and I would be pleased to have you serve with me in the army. From the day you came to me until today, I have found no fault in you.'" (vs 6)

Here, the king of the Philistines was praising the *Lord* who had been shown through David's reliability. So even though running off to the land of the Philistines may have been a plan of David's own making, God was still making Himself known through David's mistakes.

I don't know how God does that, but I think it is incredible, and it gives me great confidence and assurance. God *is* visible—no matter what we do. If we follow His plan and shine for Him, He will make Himself known. And if we choose to do things our own way without consulting Him, He will *still* make Himself known.

God is visible. Have you seen Him lately?

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Chapter 30

GOD IS GOOD TO EVERYONE.

I love seeing these glimpses of God's heart flash through in the life of David. From this chapter: "Along the way [David's men] found an Egyptian man in a field and brought him to David. *They gave him some bread to eat and water to drink*. They also gave him part of a fig cake and two clusters of raisins, for he hadn't had anything to eat or drink for three days and nights. Before long his strength returned. 'To whom do you belong, and where do you come from?' David asked him. 'I am an Egyptian—the slave of an Amalekite,' he replied. 'My master abandoned me three days ago because I was sick. We were on our way back from raiding the Kerethites in the Negev, the territory of Judah, and the land of Caleb, and *we had just burned Ziklag.'"* (vs 11-14)

David and his men were pursuing the people who had just stolen all their possessions and kidnapped their families—this Egyptian man being one of them. After seeing their town in ruins, they must have been anxious to overtake the culprits, yet the first thing David did was give this man bread and water. He could obviously see that the Egyptian was sick and weak, and before he asked him a single question, he cared for his needs.

I thought about how very much this is like God! He is good to *everyone*—whether friend or foe. When He sees us weak and in trouble, His first thought and His first action is to *help* us. Even if we've acted in a destructive manner toward Him, He doesn't retaliate. His nature is always and only to seek to do good—even repaying *good* for evil.

While it's true that we have much to fear from *sin,* we never have any reason to fear our gracious God. If we are hungry, He will feed us. If we are thirsty, He will give us water. Even if we are His enemies, He will treat us no differently than He would His friends. He is good to everyone.

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Chapter 31

GOD MOVES US FORWARD.

So, forty years after Saul became king of Israel, it's all over. The Philistines killed him and his three sons, thus leaving no direct heirs to the throne. Israel was once more kingless, and the stage set for David to take his anointed place on the throne.

However, before Saul fades into obscurity, it seemed prudent to point out two things. First, the Philistines cut off Saul's head and nailed his body to the wall of the pagan temple in Beth Shan. This was in Jabesh where, incidentally, Saul had made his debut as king forty years earlier. Second, even though the Israelites had accepted Saul as their king in order to fight the Philistines, and even though Saul had spent his forty years running an ongoing military campaign, at the king's death, the people of Israel were in virtually the same place with regard to the Philistines as they had been four decades earlier.

The point? When we don't have God in our lives, we go in circles. It is *God* who moves us forward into new horizons, and without Him, we won't get anywhere. In the end, we will land right back where we started—having made no lasting and significant progress toward our goals. Given our state of mind (as it is clouded by sin), we need the influence of God—whose ways are different from our ways and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isa 55:8)—to move us in a meaningful direction.

If we reject Him, we might as well consider it a dead end. Without Him, we ain't goin' nowhere!

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