

Sermons on 1 Samuel by Robert Morgan

SAUL THE LEADER WHO BLEW IT

1 Samuel

For several years, I maintained a membership in a health club in a nearby hotel. One day I went into their exercise room and saw a large piece of new exercise equipment. It was much nicer than anything they had previously had in that spot, and I asked about it. The attendant said, "Oh, that's just here for today and tomorrow. The president of American Airlines is going to be in town, and he requested it. He works out on one of these every day."

Sure enough, while I was working out he came in, did a brisk 25 minutes, and left. The next day, the exercise equipment was gone. But it reminded me of one of the most basic principles of leadership. Leaders are disciplined.

They are disciplined. That man's schedule must have been busy beyond belief, but he took time out every day for exercise, knowing that he couldn't function well for very long without it.

If we're going to be people of influence, we need to learn the art of living disciplined lives, and sometimes we can learn best from a negative example—which is exactly what we have in the middle portion of the book of 1 Samuel.

I'm convinced that the great theme of the book of 1 Samuel is leadership, because the whole book simply tells the story of three men—Samuel, a dependable leader; Saul, a disappointing leader; David a developing leader. For the last two weeks, we looked at the leadership qualities attributed to Samuel in 1 Samuel 3. Now today, I'd like to move on and look at the leadership qualities—and the fatal flaws—in the first king of Israel, the man named Saul. Some of this material I actually presented in a sermon several years ago, but we're looking at today in a different context. So let's begin our study in 1 Samuel 9. We can find in these passages five things about Saul:

His Charisma Was Obvious

First, Saul was a young man whose charisma was obvious. 1 Samuel 9:1-27 begins: There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zerror, the son of Becorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. He had a son named Saul, an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others.

This young man had been created by God with impressive physical qualities, and he radiated a magnetism that others could only envy. I tried to think of an actor who would be perfect for the role of Saul, and I came up with Ben Affleck. Just think of some currently-popular, handsome, young movie star and you'll have a picture of this young man, Saul.

In terms of the literature of leadership, "charisma" is a term that was introduced into our language by Max Weber in 1947, but it has been very difficult to define. I was amazed at the definition in Webster's collegiate dictionary: a personal magic of leadership arousing special popular loyalty or enthusiasm for a public figure.

In terms of 20th century politics, this term is most often used to describe John F. Kennedy. The terms, "Thousand Days," and "Camelot" and "One Brief Shining Moment" have all stressed the certain magic elegance that has come to define the Kennedy years.

Well, this tall and handsome young man, Saul, evidently had this magical quality called charisma. Put another way, the Lord made him perfect for the leadership role for which he had been born. God makes all of us just the way he wants us to be for what he wants us to do. Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared us in advance for us to do." I want you to know that you have certain strengths that God wants to use. He gave you those strengths, and he gave you those gifts. Every one of you.

His Calling Was Noble

The second thing to notice about Saul was that his calling was noble. Look at 1 Samuel 10:1-27 Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, "Has not the Lord anointed you leader over his inheritance... As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart..."

The Lord wanted to choose Saul and to use Saul to play an important role in his kingdom. In a similar way, God has a purpose and a plan for your life. What if we had to go through life without a sense of purpose or meaning?

I read the other day about a young man in New York named Joel Sherman. He's the world's new Scrabble Champion. Using words like vug and helicoid, he beat out Nigel Richards of New Zealand to take first place (and \$25,000 in prize money) in last August's international competition. When asked the secret of his success, he simply replied, "This is all I do."

Sherman, who hasn't held a regular job in ten years, spends all his time playing Scrabble. His life revolves around the board game, and he lives off the prize money he wins.

Well, I just believe that each of us has a higher purpose than playing Scrabble. The Bible says that God has set eternity in our hearts, and we instinctively feel that we are made for something special, for a significant purpose. When we commit our lives to Jesus Christ and grow in the knowledge of him and of his word, God shows us what he wants us to do. He guides us. He promises to use us to accomplish his will in this world. We become partners with him in his enterprise.

His Career Was Promising

Third, Saul's career was promising. Look at 1 Samuel 11:11: The next day Saul separated his men into three divisions; during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together. And verse 15 says that after this remarkable military victory, All the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the Lord. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.

The young King Saul got off to a great start, leading Israel into much-needed military victory over the enemies that had been long tormenting them, and he won the respect and admiration of all the people.

His Character Was Flawed

This could have been one of the greatest and most uplifting stories of the Bible, but the story of Saul quickly headed south. Although Saul's charisma was obvious, his calling noble, and his career promising, his character was flawed.

How many people have fallen from power in the last several months because their character was flawed? Executives of great corporations being led away in handcuffs. Politicians withdrawing from pivotal contests because of ethics violations. Ministers bringing reproach to the cause of Christ by grievous lapses of judgment or by moral failure. It's largely a lack of discipline.

All that describes King Saul to a "T". What exploits he might have accomplished, what victories he might have won, what history he might have made, what advances he might have made for the Kingdoms of Israel and of God if only he had been a better man.

We don't have time to trace the entire story, but in simplest terms, Saul failed to trust and to obey God. He let himself lapse into sin. And he began a long, slow, painful, shameful slide into despair. Look at 1 Samuel 13:13—"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command."

This is why we must never tolerate on-going sin in our lives. This is why we must never rationalize our weaknesses or sweep our iniquities under the rug. God wants to perfect that which concerns us. He is Jehovah M'Kaddesh—the God who sanctifies. When we are really serious about following him, he matures and develops us into his own image. The Bible says that he who has begun a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

His Crown Was Lost

But Saul wouldn't cooperate with the Lord. He continually disobeyed, ever more deeply, until in the end his confidence was gone. On the last full day of his life, he was despairing and despondent, frightened and unfocused. He had lost his relationship with the Lord, Samuel his mentor was dead, and his archenemies the Philistines were encircling him. In his extreme distress, he turned to the occult and consulted the witch of Endor.

Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in his own town at Ramah. Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritualists from the land. The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunness, while Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. 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. Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." "There is one in Endor," they said.

So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name." But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this." Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" "Bring up Samuel," he said.

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"

The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a spirit coming out of the ground." "What does he look like?" he asked. "An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?"

"I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do." Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the Lord has turned away from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. Because you did not obey the Lord or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the Lord has done this to you today. The Lord will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines."

Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and night. When the woman came to Saul and saw that he was greatly shaken, she said, "Look, your maidservant has obeyed you. I took my life in my hands and did what you told me to do. Now please listen to your servant and let me give you some food so you may eat and have strength to go on your way." He refused and said, "I will not eat." But his men joined the woman in urging him, and he listened to them. He got up from the ground and sat on the couch. The woman had a fattened calf at the house, which she butchered at once. She took some flour, kneaded it and baked bread without yeast. Then she set it before Saul and his men, and they ate. That same night they got up and left (1 Samuel 28:3-25).

The final result—Saul's crown was lost. Look at 1 Samuel 31:1-13

Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically... So Saul took his own sword and fell on it... So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day. The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head and stripped off his armor... and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

Turn to the next page, to 2 Samuel 1:1-27. Here David hears of Saul's death, and he composes a song of mourning, a lament. He says: O mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, nor fields that yield offerings of grain, for there the shield of the mighty was defiled.

The last time I was in Israel, we visited Beth Shan where Saul's body was nailed to the wall, and we gazed over at Mount Gilboawhere Saul was slain. To this day, the nation of Israel keeps a portion of this mountain barren, treeless, and desolate in fulfillment of this cry of David and in memory of the first king of Israel.

Saul's charisma was obvious, his calling noble, his career obvious. But his character was flawed and his crown was lost. The Lord loves you and he wants to do something special with your life. But inner corruption, outward compromise, and spiritual carelessness can drain away your confidence and steal away your crown.

The alternative is to commit yourself without reservation or hesitation to Jesus Christ. I'm not a big basketball fan, but I remember reading in the newspapers several years ago about the bittersweet years in which Wade Houston was the basketball coach at the University of Tennessee. His star player was his own son, Allan Houston.

Well, today Allan is a basketball superstar who plays for the New York Knicks. He recently signed a six-year, \$100 million dollar contract. I want to end my sermon this morning by reading to you something that is on Allan Houston's personal web site:

God used basketball and what it brought to my life to lead me to a strong relationship with him. After I signed with the Knicks, I had some weighty conversations with my cousin.... During one conversation it hit me – I am a basketball star because of the ability God has given me. I knew then that God had given me this gift for a reason and I started to think about the impact I could make as a professional athlete spreading the word of God.

I will never forget November 17, 1997. On that night of prayer, I dedicated my life to Christ. My relationship with God has continued to grow stronger and deeper. When you keep filling your heart with God and meditating on the Word, things come to fruition. At times, it feels like my heart just overflows with blessings. I've worked hard, but it is by God's grace that I have been put in this position. God gives me so much strength and love that I want to make sure people know about the peace He can bring to our lives....

I believe God has raised athletes to positions of influence for a reason... I have seen that athletes have the potential to share the gospel with millions of people. Athletes across the globe uniting to help spread the gospel and lead people to Christ is a powerful engine. Being a Christian and a professional athlete many times requires us to take the less popular road, the road that people

sometimes don't understand. But I find joy and strength in knowing that I am fulfilling God's purpose for my life.

So I encourage you to take the step toward the peace, joy and purpose you want from life – take the step and dedicate your life to Christ. There isn't anything or anyone who can fill your life with joy and peace like Christ. Wherever you are or whatever situation you are in, Jesus can take care of it. He will turn your dust to diamonds. You just have to trust him and allow him to take over your heart and soul. He has already made the first step when he died on the cross...all you need to do is take the next - and most important – step towards him and his wonderful salvation.

I can't say it any better than that. Give your life to Christ, and let Him make you the VIP—the Very Influential Person—He intends for you to be.

VACUUMS: THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF LEADERSHIP

1 Samuel 3:1-21

For the next three or four weeks, as the United States prepares for important mid-term elections, I would like to speak on the subject of Leadership. There's one thing that I know about leadership: It either makes or breaks an organization. Good leaders produce good organizations, and under bad leaders organizations decline.

Enron is a perfect example. Here was a company that seemed to be conservative, rock solid, and dependable. But it fell apart overnight because of one thing—flawed leadership.

On the other hand, New York City rallied after the September 11th disaster largely because of the leadership of Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who has now written a bestseller entitled Leadership. In this book, he stresses how important it is for a leader to develop and impose structures that are suitable for the organizations they are leading, and how vital it is for leaders to form a team of people who know how to bring out the best in each other.

Now, every one of us in this room is a leader in one way or another. You might have a job in which you are responsible for people working under you. You might be a leader in some area of our church's ministry. You might lead a home, or you might have a group of friends whom you influence more than you know. The Lord gives each one of us zones of influence.

The Lord wants to develop all of us into wise and seasoned leaders, and that's why we find this subject of leadership everywhere we turn in the Bible. In fact, if you study the Bible with this subject in mind, you'll find it stressed somewhere in every one of the Bible's sixty-six books. Good leaders in the Bible produced good organizations; but under bad leadership, organizations declined.

Take the kings of Judah and Israel, for example. Some of these kings were wise and upright, and under their leadership the nation of Israel prospered. But others were foolish, impulsive, corrupt, and evil; under their reigns the nation declined.

Well for the next several weeks, I'd like to take a unique approach to the subject of leadership. I'd like to look at this topic as we see it presented in the book of 1 Samuel.

An organization seldom rises higher than its leadership.

First Samuel is an Old Testament book that comes right after the book of the Judges. It is the ninth book of the Bible, and it tells the history of the Jewish people after the chaotic period of the Judges. Here's the background: After Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, Joshua was appointed to lead them into the Promised Land. But after Joshua's death, there was no real line of succession, and so for about 350 years, there was a series of military champions who more or less provided leadership for God's people.

But that period came to an end with the birth of the prophet Samuel, who paved the way for the establishing of a monarchy. The book of 1 Samuel tells the story of Israel's history from the birth of Samuel to the moment when David was poised to assume the throne of Israel. It's a very fascinating story.

Some time ago, I was reading through 1 Samuel during my devotions. Often when reading through books of the Bible, I ask myself, "What is the main theme of this book of the Bible? What is this book all about? Why did God put it in the Bible? What message does it have for us? What need does it meet?"

As I read through 1 Samuel with those questions in mind, suddenly the purpose of this book became very clear. The theme of 1 Samuel is leadership. The book of 1 Samuel falls quite naturally into three divisions, centered around the story of three leaders. The first third of the book is about a man named Samuel. The middle of the book is devoted to the story of Saul. The last third of the book is about David.

So 1 Samuel is a tale of three leaders:

- Samuel – The Dependable Leader
- Saul – The Defective Leader
- David – The Developing Leader

Let's begin today with the story of Samuel, and for our Scripture reading, turn with me to 1 Samuel 3:1-21

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. 2 One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. 3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." 5 And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

6 Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

What were the influences and characteristics that made Samuel one of the most gifted leaders in all the Scripture?

A Vacuum

First, there was a vacuum. Leadership thrives in a vacuum. Look at 1 Samuel 3:1 again: The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

Now during these days, there was very little of the inspired Scripture. Moses had written the first five books of the Bible, and they also had the book of Joshua. But that was it, and copies of these books were few. The people were uneducated. So God sent prophets to proclaim His Word. He communicated with these prophets in visions. But the moral and spiritual qualities of that generation had declined, and the times were so evil that God had almost stopped communicating. There were few people fit to be called as prophets, and there were few people who would heed the Word of the Lord. It was a shallow time. It was an age of plunging morals and of spiritual dullness.

And look at 1Sa 3:3: The Lamp of God had not yet gone out....

The setting here is the ancient Tabernacle (which we recently finished studying). After the children of Israel had entered the Promised Land, the Tabernacle had been set up in the town of Shiloh, and this is where the boy Samuel lived. When the writer here says that the lamp of God had not yet gone out, I think there are two meanings to his words.

First, this particular scene occurred in the wee hours of the morning just before the priests replenished the oil in the Menorah, the seven-branched candlestick in the Tabernacle.

But I think he also uses this phrase in a symbolic way. It's like what we read in John 13 about Judas. Do you remember? In the Upper Room on the last night of His life, Jesus said that one of His disciples was going to betray Him. And Judas rose and left the room, and John adds these words: "And it was night." He meant them literally, but they also hit us with a symbolic meaning.

Here we have the same thing. God spoke to Samuel when the oil in the Lamp of Israel was running low, both literally and figuratively. It was a time of weak leadership, falling morals, and dead spirituality. It was a time when the age of the Judges had descended into chaos. Israel's enemies were threatening to overrun them. There was no clear word from the Lord, and the oil in the Lamp was running very low.

At just that moment, God spoke to Samuel, and Samuel went on to become a great leader, because leadership thrives in a vacuum.

It's a well-known fact of American history that our greatest Presidents are those who led in times of crisis and danger. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Great presidents need great crises to make them great. Bill Clinton has reportedly complained to friends that during his eight years in the White House there was no great crisis that afforded him a chance to rise to greatness.

Several years ago, it was my privilege to attend a series of political briefings for religious leaders in Washington. At the United States Senate, we met privately with Jennings Randolph, the senior senator from West Virginia, who had first been elected to Congress in 1933. He was the only remaining member of the Senate or House of Representatives who had been elected in the great landslide that swept Franklin D. Roosevelt into office during the Great Depression.

During the course of the briefing, Senator Randolph recalled that just after the election of 1933, he was called to the White House. There, in the president's private quarters, sat FDR. The lights were low, and a fire was roaring in the fireplace. About a dozen or so leaders of the Congress had come at FDR's request. Jennings Randolph couldn't believe he had been included, as young and unknown and inexperienced as he was. But Roosevelt had his eye on Jennings Randolph.

The young congressman didn't say much that night. He just sat there in awe as Franklin Roosevelt began to speak. Roosevelt told the congressional leaders what he had in mind, and how quickly he wanted to move during the first one hundred days of his administration.

He said he intended to declare a bank holiday, which was a positive-sounding phrase that really meant closing all the nation's banks indefinitely until bankers and the government could regain control of the situation. He wanted to send Congress a record number of bills quickly and furiously, including the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

He went on and on, speaking confidently, but in such low tones that Randolph had to strain to hear him. But when FDR was finished the group was stunned and speechless until one of the senators said, "Mr. President, if we move that quickly aren't you afraid we'll make mistakes?"

Roosevelt, paused, looked at the man, considered his reply, and said, "Senator, if we don't move that quickly, we'll soon find that we no longer have the opportunity even of making mistakes."

There was a vacuum, and Roosevelt was determined to fill it.

Over and over again, I've read that the most basic principle of business success is the maxim: "Find a need and fill it." If you want to be successful in business, just find a need and fill it."

In the early 1800s there was a blacksmith in Vermont who became well known for his solid, sturdy workmanship. He made hay forks and shovels. But word began coming in from the West of vast fields capable of growing produce far in excess of what Vermont could grow, and hundreds of New Englanders began migrating to the Midwest. This blacksmith went with them, and soon he detected a serious problem. The cast iron plows the pioneers had brought with them from the East didn't work well in the Midwest. The rich, Midwestern soil clung to them, and it was necessary every few steps to stop and scrape the soil from the plow.

The blacksmith recognized the need, and in 1837, through trial and error, he designed a plow from a discarded saw mill blade. It was a polished steel plow that cleaned itself as it plowed. He built and sold ten of them, and then orders came for more and more. As he manufactured these plows, he kept changing them, causing some to criticize him. But he replied, "If we don't improve our product, somebody else will."

By 1868, he was producing 13,000 plows a year in the largest plow factory in the United States. It kept improving and changing with the times, developing other farm equipment and finally becoming a leader in the manufacture of tractors and farm equipment. Today that blacksmith's name is sitting my garage: John Deere.

He was a man who just saw a need a filled it.

Now the same principle is true spiritually. Sometimes we feel like shaking our heads and wringing our hands over the immoral conditions of our day. The entertainment world has led us into an age dominated by sex, profanity, irreverence, and immorality. There has never been a spiritual vacuum in our world like there is today. In a world of over six billion people, the times have never been worse and the need has never been greater.

But instead of shaking our heads and wringing our hands, remember this first principle of leadership: Good leadership thrives in a vacuum.

There has never been a revival that didn't begin in a vacuum. I once met a man who had devoted his life to studying the subject of revival. He was an Irish gentleman named J. Edwin Orr. After meeting him and hearing him speak, I began reading his books on the subject of revival. One of them was a book about student revivals on college campuses, entitled *Campus Aflame*. In this book, Dr. Orr wrote: Nowhere in the world have evangelical awakenings occurred so frequently as on the campuses.

He went on to describe the impact of the Second Great Awakening on American college campuses:

During the last decade of the eighteenth century, the typical Harvard student was atheist. Students at Williams College conducted a mock celebration of Holy Communion. When the Dean at Princeton opened the chapel Bible to read, a pack of playing cards fell out, some radical having cut a rectangle out of each page to fit the pack. Christians were so unpopular that they met in secret and kept their minutes in code. The radical leader of deist students led a mob in burning the Bible of a Raritan valley Presbyterian Church. Students disrupted worship services with both profanity and sputum. They burned down buildings, and they forced the resignation of college presidents.

Many historians have agreed that conditions on campus and in society were deplorable. The last two decades of the eighteenth century were the darkest period, spiritually and morally, in the history of American Christianity.

(Then came the Awakening.) So far as can be ascertained, the first of a series of college awakenings occurred as early as 1787. At Hampden Sydney College in Virginia, a few students, none of them active Christians but all of them concerned about the moral state of the college, met for prayer. They locked themselves in a room, for fear of the other students. One of them said, 'We tried to pray, but such prayer I never heard the like of.' He added, 'We tried to sing, but it was in the most suppressed manner, for we feared the other students.'

"The ungodly students created a disturbance, and their President came to investigate. He rebuked the rowdies and invited the intercessors to his study for continued prayer. They continued in power, until an awakening was felt at last. Within a short space of time, more than half the number of students professed conversion in a movement that stirred the local churches also."

The book goes on to describe the great revivals that swept over American college campuses in the late 1700s. There was a spiritual vacuum, and God raised up leaders with a burden for godliness who sparked a revival.

Let me put it a little differently. Several years ago, when I was visiting the Ivory Coast of West Africa, the time came to turn off the generator on the missions compound. All the lights went out, and I don't suppose there was a light of any kind within thirty miles. It was pitch black. But when I looked up, the stars were unbelievable. It was so dark, that their light was crystal clear. Even the weakest star twinkled in the void and in the blackness.

Stars shine brightest when the night is blackest.

You might be the only Christian in your family, or in your school, or in your place of work. You might be the only Christian on your ball team or on the golf course. Let me read you what it says in Philippians 3:14-16:

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the Word of life.

Do you want to be a leader? Just find a need and fill it. Ask the Lord, "Is there a need in someone's life that I can meet? Is there a need in this church that I can fill?" And when the Lord shows you one, go after it.

Do you want to be a witness? Just find a dark space and shine your light. Ask the Lord, "Is there someone near me who needs encouragement? Who needs hope? Is there a group of people who are so ungodly that my very life will be a testimony to them?" And when the Lord shows you that person or that group, let your light shine. Just live a consistent life of joy and victory before them. And always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is within you.

Why did Samuel become such a superb leader? Because he was born into such a depraved generation. God placed him in the middle of a group of people who were in spiritual, moral, and political crisis. And good leadership thrives in a vacuum.

God needs leaders, and He's looking for you and me. For as 2 Chronicles 16:9 says:

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him (NKJV).

IF GOD CAN USE THIS BOY, HE CAN USE YOU!

Recently Newsweek Magazine commissioned a writer to study golfer Tiger Woods and other stratospheric and dominate athletes, with a view toward finding out what makes them the greatest in their fields. When the article came out, it listed five rules that were true of all truly dominate athletes. The first was: "Genius is 99 percent perspiration." "It takes good, old-fashioned hard work," said the article. "There is no magic pill." At almost every tournament, for example, Tiger can be seen after tournament play pounding golf ball after golf ball long into the twilight. He never stops practicing.

Well, today I'd like to ask the question: "What does it take to be a leader from God's perspective? What makes us usable? How can we become people of influence?"

Our Scriptural studies on this subject are coming from the ninth book of the Bible—1 Samuel. It occurred to me earlier this year as I was reading through 1 Samuel during my devotions that the great, overarching theme of this book is leadership. First Samuel is the story of three leaders: Samuel, Saul, and David. One was a dominant leader. The next was a deficient leader. The third was a developing leader.

Last week and today, we're looking at the boy Samuel as described in 1 Samuel 3. What made him a dominant and dependable leader? Let's read this entire chapter and look for clues:

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

2 One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. 3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple a of the LORD, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." 5 And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

6 Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

8 The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

11 And the LORD said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. 12 At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. 13 For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, b and he failed to restrain them. 14 Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

15 Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, 16but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son."

Samuel answered, "Here I am."

17 "What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you." 18 So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes."

19 The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. 21 The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

And Samuel's word came to all Israel.

There are several leadership axioms woven into this passage. The first one we looked at last week.

Leaders Function Best in a Vacuum

First, leadership functions best in a vacuum. We devoted last week's message to this, so I'll do nothing more than mention it: Samuel was born during a time when the Word of the Lord was rarely heard, and the lamp of God was burning low. It was a time of religious declension and spiritual lethargy. But that's just the time when leadership is most needed. Samuel knew how to find a vacuum and exploit it; how to find a need and fill it; how to find some darkness and illumine it.

Leaders Are Faithful in Little Things

Second, the boy Samuel became a great and mighty leader in ancient Israel because he was first faithful in little things. Let me show you some verses about Samuel:

1 Samuel 2:11: Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest. This was when Samuel was very young, when he had been taken by his parents to the Tabernacle and given to Eli to raise in the service of the Lord. And at a very early age, Samuel began ministering before the Lord. What does that mean?

I suppose it means that Eli gave him some little chores to do around the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Perhaps he had to wash the pails that carried the blood from the animal sacrifices. Perhaps he had to pick up debris that blew in from the desert—clear away the tumbleweed and sagebrush. Perhaps he had to polish some of the silver that adorned the tabernacle. Perhaps he had to open the gates every morning and close them every night.

But whatever it was, Samuel did it faithfully. Look at 1 Samuel 2:18, where the same phrase is repeated: But Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod.

Look at 1 Samuel 2:21: Meanwhile the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord.

And 1 Samuel 2:26: And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.

And 1 Samuel 3:1: The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli.

Even in his youth, Samuel was faithful in whatever was assigned to him.

Now, in today's terms, we would say that Samuel was Eli's intern. Eli was the priest and judge over Israel in those days, and Samuel came as a boy to be trained by him and to work for and with him.

Through the years I've had quite a few college students who wanted to work out of my office as an intern. And looking back on the experiences, it's very easy to see that these various interns fall into two categories. Some of them I would suggest or assign a task, and I would have to keep checking with them, sometimes nagging them about it. I was never really sure the job would be done, or that it would be done well. But other interns were different. If I gave them a project to do, I never had to think about it again. I knew it would be done, and that it would be done very well.

I find the same two kinds of people everywhere I turn, both in society and in the church. Some people are faithful in little things. If they say they're going to work in the nursery, or sing in the choir, or anything else, you can count on them. They'll be present, and they'll get the job done. But with other members, you just don't know if they're going to show up or not.

God is looking for people who will be faithful in little things. That means, of course, that we need to learn the discipline of saying "No" to too many obligations. If you're like me, you commit to too many things, and as a result you can't do any of them as faithfully and as well as you'd like. I think the Lord would have us use discretion and commit to do a few things well, to do them faithfully. It may be a little thing, but I want to remind you of what missionary J. Hudson Taylor once said: A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a great thing.

Jesus stated this principle in Luke 16:10, saying: Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much. And He promised these words to those who were faithful in little: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:21).

Leaders Learn To Listen to the Voice of God

So Samuel was born into a vacuum, he was faithful in little things, and third, he learned to listen to the voice of God.

When I was a college student, I was greatly inspired by Henry David Thoreau's famous quotation: "If a man does not keep pace with his fellow companions, perhaps it is because he hears the beat of a different drummer."

Samuel became a great leader because he learned to march to the beat of a different drummer, he learned to stand in the counsel of the Almighty, he learned to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant heareth."

One of my favorite leadership stories is told by Warren Bennis in his book *Why Leaders Can't Lead*. He tells of a friend of his who became the president of one of America's greatest universities. He had innovative goals and plans, and he was fired up for the challenge. But within a few years, he resigned in disillusionment. His reason: "I could never get around to doing the things I wanted to do."

In other words, the overwhelming crush of the urgent—the paperwork, the daily routine, the daily demands—was so great that this man was never able to conceptualize, to rise above the urgent to the truly important. He had to spend so much time managing the status quo that he was never able to rise up to the level of leader.

Warren Bennis concluded: "The leader should incorporate a reflective arena into his or her structure, so that time out for musing is mandatory... If people in authority stopped regularly to think about what they were doing, they would have the kinds of fresh insights they now pay consultants dearly for."

If we're going to be people of influence, we have got to rise above the urgent, demanding, daily rat-race, and spend time alone with God, studying His Word and having a sense of what He wants us to do.

My best ideas come during my daily quiet time, when I'm studying His Word at leisure and spending time in prayer and in prayerful thought. When was the last time you set aside an hour or a morning or a day, and just had your Bible and notebook, and you opened it, saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"?

Leaders Make Themselves Constantly Available to God

Fourth, leaders make themselves constantly available to God. When I read 1 Samuel 3 some time ago during my devotions, the thing that struck me most forcibly was how often one particular phrase occurred. Look again at this passage with me:

1 Samuel 3:4-5: Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

1 Samuel 3:6: Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

1 Samuel 3:8: The Lord called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am."

1 Samuel 3:16: "But Eli called him and said, "Samuel my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am."

In this one chapter, the boy Samuel says five times: "Here I am... Here I am... Here I am... Here I am... Here I am."

It reminds me of what Isaiah said in chapter 6 of his prophecy: "Here I am. Send me."

It reminds me of something I once read in the diary of David Brainard, the early American missionary to the Indians: Here am I, send me; send me to the ends of the earth; send me to the rough, the savage pagans of the wilderness; send me from all that is called comfort on earth; send me even to death itself, if it be but in Thy service and to promote Thy kingdom.

I once read that Dr. George Mackay, veteran missionary to Formosa (Taiwan), traveled across North America for two years trying to recruit young men for Asian evangelism, but he grew discouraged. One night as he was preaching and appealing for workers for China, he unburdened his heart and told his congregation that as a recruiter for missions, he had been a failure. Listening that evening was a young college student named Jonathan Goforth, who later became perhaps the most effective Western evangelist ever to labor in China. That very evening while Mackay was pronouncing himself a failure, God was calling Jonathan Goforth to be a missionary to China. Goforth later wrote: I heard the voice of the Lord saying: "Who will go for us and whom shall we send?" and I answered: "Here am I, send me." From that hour I became a foreign missionary.

One of the dearest women I've ever known was Mabel Willey, who was one of the earliest pioneer missionaries for our denomination. This is what she wrote about God's calling her to a committed Christian life: One Sunday I attended a service with a visiting evangelist. "Is there anyone in this audience who feels your life is empty? You want to do something, but there isn't the power, the strength of the Holy Spirit?" As the choir sang, I slipped quietly to the altar. "Lord, here I am. I can offer nothing but myself. That's all I have, but I want this power to serve you."

The great reformer, Savonarola, once said: I offer myself to Thee as a sacrifice: here I am, I am happy to die for Thee, and I beg Thee to grant that I die only in defense of Thy truth.

If you want to live a life of significance, you've got to realize that God wants to use you, and that all there is of God is available to the person who is available to all there is of God, to the person who will say, "Lord, here I am."

Leaders Depend on God For Their Authority

Finally, leaders depend on God for their authority. I think the last three verses of this chapter are so refreshing:

The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and He let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet to the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through His Word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel.

Samuel didn't waste one minute trying to jockey for position, trying to scratch and claw his way to the top, trying to win respect and recognition. He just followed the Lord, and God established him as the leader of Israel.

The famous psychiatrist, Dr. Alfred Adler, taught that most psychological disorders arise from striving for power. Many people are caught up with others in a daily struggle for power, and our nerves can't stand that kind of constant strain.

I think the better plan is just to be faithful in little things, pray about every possible opportunity, stay close to the Lord, and let Him open doors for us. It really doesn't matter whether our place is a small place or a large place, so long as it is His place for us.

Can you imagine what would have happened if Samuel had let himself be pulled into a power struggle with Eli? If Samuel had started striving for greatness? If Samuel had tried to promote himself to a high position?

He wasn't passive and he didn't avoid the responsibility of leadership when it came his way, but neither did he go out of his way looking for it.

He just humbled himself before the Lord, and the Lord exalted him in due time.

So what kind of person—what kind of leader—is God looking for? Someone who knows how to exploit vacuums, who is faithful in little things, who marches to the beat of a divine drummer and knows how to listen to God's voice, who is available, and whose only ambition is to fulfill the Lord's will for his or her life, who says in the words of an old hymn:

We thank Thee, Lord, Thy paths of service lead
To blazoned heights and down the slopes of need;
They reach Thy throne, encompass land and sea,
And those who journey in them walk with Thee.

After all, if God can use the boy Samuel, He can surely use the likes of you and me!

GLANCING BACKWARD, FACING FORWARD

1 Samuel 7:12

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far (hitherto) has the Lord helped us." 1 Samuel 7:12

When Katrina and I came down here to Nashville in 1980, out of the hills, coming to pastor this church twenty-five years ago, one of my first assignments was to plan our church's 25th anniversary service. 1980 was Donelson's Silver Anniversary. We planned a great service for a particular day that year, and we celebrated in the old chapel with a number of the charter members present. Vernon Whaley led the choir, we gave flowers to "Ma" Miller, heard from Oleda Rudy, and our theme for the day was from Ephesians 3:21: Unto Him Be Glory in the Church. I think of that day quite often because we now have a set of pictures devoted to it in the Hall of Heritage near the church offices, and the recollections are also stored away in the dusty and obscure corners of the museum of my memories. As I stood on stage that day, preaching from Ephesians 3:21, it somehow never dawned on me that a day would come when we'd be celebrating our Golden Anniversary, acknowledging fifty years of God's faithfulness to us—but here we are; but the theme in our hearts is still the same: Unto Him be glory in the church!

And yet today, as I speak from the Scriptures a quarter century later, I'd like to choose a different verse and a different slogan our celebration, this one we're read from 1 Samuel 7: Hitherto has the Lord helped us. The two themes actually go together very nicely, and on these two mountaintop days, separated by a valley of 25 years, we affirm our thanksgiving and praise to God.

Hitherto has the Lord helped us!
Unto Him be glory in the church!

The hitherto verse is found here in the book of 1 Samuel in the middle of a gripping Old Testament story. The first several chapters of this book tell the story of Israel during hard and bitter times. It had been a period of war and defeat. Thousands of their young men were killed in two terrible battles with the Philistines; and compounding their sorrow, the fabled Ark of the Covenant had been

captured. The children of God were utterly demoralized by their failures, and there was a crisis of confidence in their young, fledgling nation. It was into this dolorous milieu that the young prophet Samuel assumed the leadership of Israel following the death of his mentor, Eli.

Samuel's first act was to call his nation to repentance. You cannot separate a nation's morality from its spirituality. When a nation declines spiritually, it declines morally; and when it declines morally, sooner or later it declines militarily and monetarily. And so Samuel's first action was to call his nation to repentance.

1 Samuel 7:3-17 says:

And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel: '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."

When Samuel saw that his message had struck a chord, he decided to take it a step further and call a national assembly, to gather the population together at one time and in one place, to launch a great nationwide revival. Israel needed a new beginning, they needed a turning point, they needed a moment with destiny. Look at verse 5:

Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you." When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.

In other words, in calling this assembly and challenging Israel to turn the corner, to repent of her sins, to rededicate herself to the Lord, Samuel had shown himself a strong leader, and this was recognized by all the people. Finally someone with a clarion call and a firm hand had arisen in the vacuum. A match had been struck amid the darkness of their national gloom. Someone had now arisen—not from the military but from the ministry—to take charge.

But just as suddenly, a new crisis arose. This many people—thousands of them—gathered in one place at one time was a noteworthy event, and the news instantly spread to their enemies in the Philistine cities nearby. Continue reading in verse 7:

When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. They said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that He may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines." Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. He cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him.

While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle.

Samuel must have been a man of solid faith and steady nerves. Had it been me, I would have stopped the church service, panicked, and either gone for the guns or run for cover. But Samuel just continued his sacrifice of the Lamb as a burnt offering as if nothing untoward were happening around him. And look at the next sentence:

But that day the Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car.

On that day, God gave the victory as Samuel offered a lamb as a sacrifice for the sins of the people. In the Old Testament, the offering of the lamb was an adumbration, a prototype or a prophecy, of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. As Samuel pointed the people toward the Lamb of God, the Lord gave the victory and the people rejoiced.

The pattern hasn't changed, not one bit in these 3500 years. In your own individual lives and in our church as a whole, we've got to (1) rid ourselves of idols, (2) confess our sins, (3) turn our panic into prayer, (4) trust in the blood of the Lamb, and (5) claim the victory.

Then notice what Samuel did:

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the Lord helped us." So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again.

In other words, Samuel said, "I'm going to put a stone pillar, a monument, to commemorate this turning point in our history." We do such things in our own day and age. In my hometown of Elizabethton, Tennessee there's a huge monument in front of the courthouse. It looks like a downsized version of the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. The only problem was that when I was growing up, no one knew what it signified. We just called it "the monument," and it had stood there for so long that we didn't

remember what it denoted. And then about ten or fifteen years ago, it was refurbished and re-dedicated to all the soldiers from Carter County who have every fought in any war since the American Revolution.

Samuel built a monument of stones dedicated to this seminal event in Israeli history, the day in 1 Samuel 7 when the nation turned from idols, confessed their sins, turned their panic into prayer, offered the blood of the Lamb, and claimed the victory. Thus far, said Samuel, has the Lord helped us.

And on that day they dedicated that monument and called it Ebenezer, a Hebrew word meaning “Stone of Help,” or the stone or monument commemorating the time when God helped us and reversed the course of our nation.

There’s an old song that applies this truth to our lives today:

Here I raise mine Ebenezer,
Hither by Thy help I’ve come;
And I hope by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

Well, for us this is an Ebenezer day, for we want to pause in the life of our church and take a look in two directions.

Glancing Back in Appreciation

First, we glance back in appreciation. One of the reasons why a fiftieth anniversary is better than a 100th anniversary is because some of the original founders and early organizers of our church are still here to celebrate with us, and we want to tell them “Thank you,” with all our hearts.

You know, this isn’t something that is unique with us. A similar sentiment swept over our nation beginning in 1984. When I began pastoring here in 1980, America was still reeling from the twin catastrophes of Vietnam and Watergate, and our citizens, both young and old, were cynical. Our outgoing president had told us that America was suffering from a deep sense of malaise, and our new president had been wounded in an assassination attempt in the first weeks of his presidency.

But as he recovered, President Ronald Reagan wanted to restore a sense of gratitude and patriotism to our national consciousness. He knew that many of the veterans of World War II were passing from the scene, and so he choose the fortieth anniversary of D-Day to deliver the most powerful speech of his presidency. His staff assigned a new, young speech writer named Peggy Noonan, who had never even met Ronald Reagan, to work on the President’s remarks in front the Ranger Memorial at Normandy.

And on June 6, 1984, on the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, President Ronald Reagan stood in front of a large stone monument, an Ebenezer monument, with the English Channel behind him. Before him were row after row of old men who as boys had stormed the beaches and taken those cliffs. With great emotion, Reagan told the story of Allied Invasion of Europe,

These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. And these are the heroes who helped end a war.

There was something so powerful about those words that it set off a wave of nostalgia and appreciation that led to several important books being published and movies released. Stephen Ambrose wrote Band of Brothers. Steven Spielberg produced Saving Private Ryan. And most importantly, Tom Brokaw wrote, The Greatest Generation, and that title came to characterize an entire epoch of American history, a generation of men and women who faced the rigors of economic depression, the horrors of Pearl Harbor, and the twin threats of German and Japanese aggression. They won a war, and then they came home to build a nation. They came back to build our schools, our commercial enterprises, and our churches.

And this is the generation—the Greatest Generation—who fifty years ago established this church. They had a vision for planting a congregation here that would become, in my retrospective opinion, a world-class church. And so to these former pastors who bore the burden of the work and the heat of the day, and to our faithful long-term members, we say “We remember your labor of love, and we love you for it, and we thank you with all our hearts.”

Facing Forward in Anticipation

And yet, knowing the progressive orientation of this greatest generation, I expect they would tell me not to become fixated on the past. Our greatest work is ahead of us, and while we should glance backward in appreciation, we should face forward in anticipation.

We have work to do, and the sun isn’t dipping into the horizon yet; it’s at its mid-day strength. We still have souls to win, missionaries to send, multitudes to reach, buildings to build, programs to establish, and goals to reach. Right now, we’re contemplating finishing out the lower level of our Celebration Center as a state-of-the-art facility for reaching and teaching children as well as the renovation of our total church plant. I’m so sure that we can do this—and that we must do it—that I’m ready to break

ground today (although this project doesn't really require ground-breaking). We're ready to go. The past is prologue, and everything we've done thus far is simply a staging area for launching into the future.

As we look to the future, here are two very interesting verses in the Bible that we can put side-by-side. In the Upper Room Discourse of John 14, Jesus said: "Without Me, you can do nothing." But in Philippians 4, Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Without Christ, all our efforts are useless; but with Christ working through us, we can do whatever He calls us to do—even the impossible.

This is the secret that has fueled God's workers in every generation. Years ago, I met the Dutch Christian and holocaust survivor, Corrie ten Boom, and I've always been so encouraged by her and by her incredible stories. One of her simplest tales is about the time she was the sole passenger aboard a Dutch freighter. The violent seas had made her seasick, but she was determined to try and conduct an evangelistic service for the ship's crew in the mess room. The captain dutifully posted the announcement, and promptly at 11 o'clock on Sunday morning, Corrie showed up to find no one there except a lad from the kitchen bringing her coffee. "Are you going to stay?" Corrie asked him, "I have a very interesting story to tell you."

"I don't want to hear that nonsense," said the boy who turned and left.

Plopping into a chair, Corrie said, "I never saw so empty a church, just a cup of coffee and myself." She returned to her cabin weary and discouraged, and on the next Sunday she decided to abandon her efforts. "Lord, I am not a missionary," she prayed. "Send me back to my watchmaking business."

Just then she opened her Bible to find a piece of paper. She'd never seen it before and didn't know where it had come from. The little poem said:

Cowardly, wayward, and weak,
I change with the changing sky,
Today so eager and strong,
Tomorrow not caring to try.
But He never gives in,
And we two shall win,

...Jesus and I

Corrie later recalled: "Instantly I see it! I am not worthy at all. The branch without the Vine cannot produce fruit, but I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. The strongest and the weakest branches are worth nothing without the Vine; but connecting to it they have the same nature."

Enlisting the efforts of the captain, Corrie planned another Sunday service; and this time ten men showed up—even the boy from the mess hall who, as he was leaving, admitted, "It was not boring at all!"[1]

The medieval Christian mystic, Thomas à Kempis, wrote "O Lord, let that which seems naturally impossible to me become possible through Your grace." [2]

Commentator Matthew Henry said, "In all conflicts, let us remember that with God nothing is impossible; and as we read and hear His promises, let us turn them into prayers."[3]

Missionary Amy Carmichael told her workers, "When you are facing the impossible, you can count on the God of the impossible."

Missionary statesman J. Oswald Sanders, wrote, "(God) encourages us to ask as freely for the impossible as for the possible, since to Him all difficulties are the same size—less than Himself."

Oswald Chamber wrote in My Utmost for His Highest, "When once we see Jesus, He does the impossible thing as naturally as breathing."[4]

The dean of American prayer writers, E. M. Bounds, wrote, "Faith does the impossible because it brings God to undertake for us, and nothing is impossible with God."[5]

Chuck Swindoll said, "The One who directed that stone in between Goliath's eyes and split the Red Sea down the middle and leveled that wall around Jericho and brought His Son back from beyond takes delight in mixing up the odds as He alters the inevitable and bypasses the impossible."[6]

Evangelist Michael Guido preached, "You cannot bring a burden too heavy for God to lift or a problem too hard for Him to solve or a request too big for Him to answer. God does things no one else can do."

Charles Spurgeon, the Victorian Prince of Preachers once thundered from his pulpit, "When you are dealing with Him who is omnipotent, faithful, and true, the things that seem utterly impossible will be those most likely to happen." [7]

Charles Wesley, studying Abraham's faith as described in Romans 4:13, wrote a hymn of eleven verses about it, the most popular stanza of which says:

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,
And looks to (God) alone;
Laughs at life's impossibilities,
And cries, It shall be done!

And listen to this quote by Warren Wiersbe: "Our faith is not really tested until God asks us to bear what seems unbearable, do what seems unreasonable, and expect what seems impossible." [8]

Missionary heroine Mary Slessor prayed as she began her work in Calabar: "Lord, the task is impossible for me but not for Thee. Lead the way and I will follow. Why should I fear? I am on a Royal Mission. I am in the service of the King of Kings."

This isn't just a matter "possibility thinking" or maintaining a positive attitude. It isn't a "can do" philosophy of believing "where there's a will there's a way." It's a matter of trusting Jesus Christ to enable us to accomplish His will for our lives, whatever that entails.

After all, it was Jesus Himself who said, "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God... With men it is impossible, but not with God, for with God all things are possible... If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes" (Luke 18:27; Mark 10:27; Mark 9:23).

As Gabriel told the Virgin Mary before the birth of Christ: "For with God nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

If the word "impossible" isn't found in heaven's dictionaries, then our job is to do our best, letting the Lord do the rest.

During the course of these 50 years and during these last 25 years, there has been so very much of hard work and heartache, but there have been so many hallelujahs! There's no way for us to calculate the number of men, women, boys, and girls who have come to faith in Jesus Christ, both here and around the world, both directly and indirectly, through our combined ministries, and today we stand at our place of Ebenezer. We glance backward in appreciation, but we face forward in anticipation, attempting great things for God and expecting great things from God.

So here we raise our Ebenezer:
Hither by Thy help we've come.
And we hope by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

And so we say: Unto Him be glory in the Church!

[1] Corrie Ten Boom, *Clippings From My Notebook* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), pp. 77-78.

[2] Thomas Kempis. (1996). *The Imitation of Christ*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems.

[3] Henry, M., & Scott, T. (1997). *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary (Lk 1:26)*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems.

[4] Chambers, O. (1993, c1935). *My Utmost for His Highest : Selections for the Year (February 29)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers.

[5] Bounds, E. M. (1999). *The Necessity of Prayer*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

[6] Swindoll, C. R. (2000, c1998). *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1501 Other Stories (electronic ed.)*. Logos Library System; Swindoll leadership library. Nashville: Word Publishers.

[7] Spurgeon, C., & Clarke, R. H. (2000, c1999). *Beside Still Waters : Words of Comfort for the Soul (electronic ed.)*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

[8] Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1991). *Be Obedient (Ge 22:3)*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

THE CURE FOR TENSION

2 Samuel 13-16, Psalm 3

As I was reading the newspaper one day this week, I noted how often the journalists and newswriters depend on the words "tense" and "tension." Relations between China and the U.S. are described as "tense." Negotiations over a professional ballplayer's contract were "tense." There is increased "tension" on the West Bank. It's a word that Americans love to use.

The word "tense" comes from the Latin word "tendere," which means "to stretch" or "to strain." Our English word "tendon" comes from the same word. Tense and tension have the idea of being stretched taut. Pulled. Like a rubber band ready to snap.

All of us live with a certain amount of tension, and sometimes it gets to us. We talk about tension headaches; I had one this week. I'm not sure why it came, but I had to take two or three Excedrins and lay down for awhile until the pounding stopped. Sometimes Katrina will rub my neck or shoulders and tell me that my muscles are very tense. Now, I don't think I'm any more tense than anyone else, but it is a modern problem for most of us, and it's a serious one. Doctors tell us that prolonged tension can lead to insomnia, high blood pressure (we sometimes describe this using the word hyper-tension), heart disease, gastrointestinal problems; it can even shorten our lives.

There are many strategies for coping with tension. Doctors and therapists can teach us relaxation techniques. They tell us to get more exercise, especially walking. They tell us to take time for ourselves every day, and to learn to say "No" and to simplify our lives. All of that is very, very important. I concur with it, and I'm trying to put it into practice in my own life.

But to a certain extent, this is also a spiritual problem. You know, almost all our mental and emotional and lifestyle problems have spiritual dimensions, and today I'd like to look at Psalm 3 and find there with you a cure for tension. Psalm 3:1-8 is very short—eight verses—and it is the first Psalm to bear a title; it is one of fourteen that are by their titles linked to certain historical events in the life of David.

O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him."

But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the Lord I cry aloud, and He answers me from His holy hill.

I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.

Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessings be on your people.

Storms Blow In (Ps 3:1-2)

The first two verses tell us that storms blow into our lives, and the title of the Psalm gives us the background: A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom. That story is told in the book of 2 Samuel, and I'd like for us scan it briefly.

We really should begin in 2 Samuel 13:1-39 when a conflict erupted between King David's children. In keeping with the customs of his day, the king had multiple wives. It was very foolish and led to all sorts of problems. The story in this chapter involves three of David's children by two of his wives. Amnon was his son by one wife, and the beautiful Tamar and the handsome Absalom, were his children by another wife. Well, Amnon, developed an infatuation for his half-sister Tamar, and he actually molested her. As you might expect, Absalom was furious and for two years he plotted revenge. Then he killed Amnon. He killed his half-brother for raping his full sister. As a result, he fled the country and lived in exile for three years.

In 2 Samuel 14:1-33, certain political intrigues were put into play that allowed him to return to Jerusalem, but his heart was still embittered by what had happened to his sister. And he evidently had some bitter feelings toward his own father, David, or at least he had some very powerful political ambitions of his own. And Absalom began plotting the overthrow of his father's government. He was handsome as a Hollywood hunk, smart as a scientist, and if there had been public opinion polls in those days, he would have scored the highest numbers of any figure in the country.

Now look at 2 Samuel 14:25: In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him. Whenever he cut the hair of his head—he used to cut his hair from time to time when it became too heavy for him—he would weigh it, and its weight was 200 shekels by the royal standard.

2 Samuel 15 describes the events leading up to the rebellion, and 2 Samuel 15:6 says that he stole the hearts of the men of Israel. The crisis hit David out of nowhere. 2 Samuel 15:13 says: A messenger came to told David, "The heart of the men of Israel are with Absalom." Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, "Come! We must flee or none of us will escape from

Absalom."

So David and his inner circle quickly abandoned the capital in a desperate effort to escape his own son and large segments of his own army which had joined the rebellion. Now look at 2 Samuel 16:14: The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted. And there he refreshed himself. In other words, he and his entourage were running for their lives. They escaped the capital and fled into the wilderness, and there they found an overnight spot where they could set up camp. And there David refreshed himself. How did he do that?

He had a good night's sleep, and the next morning during his morning "quiet time" he composed Psalm 3. That is the background of this psalm. Psalm 3 is a page from David's personal journal written on the morning after he had fled from the popular Absalom.

So don't you think we can learn something here about dealing with tension?

Ps 3:1-2 tell us that storms blow into our lives, and sometimes they can blow in from nowhere, and they can seem to put us in hopeless straits. O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." The conventional wisdom among Israelites is, "David's finished. He's done for. We woke up this morning with a new king. The old government has been overthrown."

Now David was facing crises here on multiple levels. First, it was a family crisis. This wasn't just a political enemy who had plotted to overthrow him; it was his own son. In my twenty-four years of pastoral ministry, I've watched people go through many kinds of storms, and I've gone through a few of them myself. The most painful ones are family-related. The deepest and most precious relationships in life are family relationships—the husband and wife, the parents and the children, the siblings, the grandparents. Home truly is where the heart is. And when families are torn apart, when family members are in crisis—that is the deepest pain a human being can endure.

But second, it was a vocation and financial crisis. In essence David was fired from his job, humiliated in the eyes of the entire nation, ignobly evicted from his own home and stripped of all his possessions. His bank accounts and assets were seized by the government.

But third, it was a physical crisis. Large segments of the Israeli army were combing the hills of Judea with instructions to kill him on sight. I'll never forget the sermon that Bill Evans preached here in which he described for us his spiritual struggles after he had been diagnosed with what appeared at the time to be terminal cancer. How do we react when we find ourselves in a crisis in which we are not likely to survive.

Fourth, it was a national crisis. Some here, including me, are old enough to remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which it appeared that the United States and the Soviet Union would soon be in a nuclear confrontation that could effectively destroy the world. There was nothing else talked about as a heavy blanket of apprehension hung over the nation.

Finally, I believe it might have been a spiritual crisis for David, for none of this would have happened but for his own immorality with Bathsheba, which had occurred in 1 Samuel 11:1-15. Before 1 Samuel 11, we do not read of any real problems in David's family life. After 1 Samuel 11, he has one problem after another in his home. Now, this was a sin of which he had sincerely repented and for which God forgave him. But he kept having to deal with the consequences.

So storms blow in, and sometimes they can just about sweep us off our feet.

Prayer Looks Up (Ps 3:3-4)

So if you want to talk about tension, just read Ps 3:1-2. But now I want us to notice David's response in Ps 3:3-4. Storms blow in, but prayer looks up: But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the Lord I cry aloud, and He answers me from His holy hill.

David had a very interesting prayer technique here. If it had been me, I would have brought the Lord about one hundred specific prayer requests, and it is possible, even likely, that David did that audibly and verbally. But in terms of this written prayer, he doesn't actually make a request; just an affirmation. He comes before the Lord in prayer to affirm that Jehovah is his shield: But you are a shield around me, O Lord....

He visualizes God's protective care as a giant enveloping shield. Now, that doesn't communicate very well to us, because most of us have never owned a shield; so let's think in sci-fi terms. Do you remember on the old Star Trek television series that sometimes the Starship Enterprise would come under attack by the Klingons, and Captain Kirk would order, "Activate shields!" Mr. Spock would fiddle at the controls and reply, "Shields Up." Somehow electromagnet deflector shields would surround the Enterprise and ward off the deadly attack.

Well, the word "shield" and "shields" occur exactly 100 times in New International Version of the Bible, beginning with God's promise

to Abraham in Genesis 15:1: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

The last occurrence is from 1 Peter 1:3-5 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

The word "**shield**" is found twenty-two times in the Psalms.

- Psalm 5:12: For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.
- Psalm 7:10: My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart.
- Psalm 18: The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.... As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him... You give me your shield of victory

In the middle of a tense situation, I don't know of any more powerful mental and spiritual tool than reminding ourselves that God is the shield and the exceeding great reward for those who are committed to Him in Jesus Christ.

O worship the King, all glorious above,

And gratefully sing His power and His love;

Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,

Pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise.

Faith Lies Down (Ps 3:5-6)

And that leads to the third stanza, Ps 3:5-6. Now, before we read these verses I'd like to ask you a question. How would you answer if someone asked you to name some of the great illustrations of mighty faith in the Bible?

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn that says:

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees

And trusts in God alone.

Laughs at life's impossibilities

And cries, "It shall be done."

What are some of the Bible's greatest examples of "faith, mighty faith?" Well, you might mention Noah, when warned of things unseen, built an ark in the middle of the landscape for the saving of his family. You might think of Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, went, even though he did not know where he was going. Perhaps you'd tell me about Moses, standing nose-to-nose with Pharaoh, demanding, "Let my people go!" You might mention Elijah's contest on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal. You might think of Peter walking on the water or the apostle Paul charging the ramparts of the Roman Empire with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But I would like to suggest that one of the greatest acts of faith in the Bible amounted to nothing more nor less than David's lying down to sleep in Psalm 3. Ps 3:5 says: I lie down and sleep, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.

Sometimes there is no greater act or exercise of faith than going to bed and falling asleep. Now, I'm mentioning this because it cuts into my own life. As recently as last Monday night, I woke up at 2:30 in the morning and a worrisome thought shot through my mind that kept me awake for two hours. And sometimes I struggle with knowing whether, in an urgent situation, I should stay up and pray or go on to bed. I do believe there are times when a situation is so critical that we ought to stay on our knees through the night. The apostles disappointed our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane by going to bed, as it were, when they should have been praying.

But this is where spiritual sensitivity comes in. I think, during any particular time of tension, we should stay up and pray as long as the Lord tells us to, then we should leave it in His hands, go to bed, and trust Him to hand it while we're sleeping. The Bible says, "He gives to His beloved sleep."

I often think of Jesus, sleeping in the midst of the storm. I think of the apostle Peter in Acts 12, in jail, guarded around the clock by

an army of soldiers. On the night before he is to be tried and condemned, what is he doing? He was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sleeping so soundly that then angel had a hard time waking him to set him free.

When Nelson Bell was a missionary physician to China, he was caught with his family in an area that was essentially a war zone. Shells would whiz over their house at night, but they would claim the promise that is found—not in Psalm 3 but in the next chapter, Psalm 4:8 —I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. Dr. Bell later wrote: "It was a question of either resting in God's promises for our safety and our protection, of resting in bed, or being fearful and getting out. And we chose to stay in bed."

I read about one old woman who said this in her bedtime prayer, "Well, Lord, the Bible says that you never sleep and you never slumber, so if you're going to stay awake, I think I'll go on to sleep."

God Goes Forth (Ps 3:7-8)

How does God respond to that kind of faith? Well, we can label the last two verses of Psalm 3: God Goes Forth. We read, Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people. We must trust God to help, save, and deliver.

Now, there is one more interesting aspect to Psalm 3, and that is this—it is followed by Psalm 4. The two go together. Psalm 3 is David's morning devotions, but Psalm 4:1-8 represents his evening devotions. He both began and ended the day in prayer, reminding himself of God's great omnipotent power, protection, pardon, and presence. Psalm 4 says:

Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer. How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him.

(Now, David speaks to himself and to us about our thoughts as we retires each night). In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer right sacrifices and trust in the Lord. Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?" Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord. You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

If you want to overcome tension in your life, make a conscious decision to both begin and end the day with the Lord. Storms blow in; prayers go up; faith lies down; and God goes forth to help His people.

He is our shield and our exceeding great reward.

T he Peril Of Incomplete Obedience

1 Samuel 15, Esther 3

... and do not give the devil a foothold—Ephesians 4:27

All of us are bound to be glued to our television sets tomorrow as President Bill Clinton testifies before the Grand Jury in the Monica Lewinsky matter, but most pundits think that even if the President has had a string of immoral relationships of some sort with Lewinsky and others, the American public is ready to shrug it off, for the president has many qualities that we greatly admire. In some ways he is the most gifted leader we have had in recent memory. But USA Today, last Thursday, devoted an interesting column to speculating why his alleged marital infidelity doesn't seem to damage his popularity in the polls. The column was written by William Mattox Jr., one of the paper's contributing editors, and it was entitled, "Honey, I Shrunk the Presidency." Mattox wrote, "The greatest reason for the apparent public indifference to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair is that Americans have largely lost the ability to distinguish right from wrong—or at least the ability to articulate moral objections in public about immoral behavior done in private. Some of our difficulty stems from a legitimate disdain for judgment, for witch hunts or for the appearance thereof. But most of our difficulty stems from a growing willingness to tolerate and even normalize behaviors (including lying and adultery) which are clearly wrong, according to the time-honored Top 10 List which Moses first read to the Israelites."

Well, I don't know what show be done in the Clinton-Lewinsky matter, but I do think that the newspaper columnist is correct in stating that many Americans have lost the ability to discern right from wrong. This is largely because many people today are shaping their own personal values more from the television programs they watch than from the Scriptures they read. Hollywood's immorality is becoming America's standard morality.

That causes us to be very lenient with sin as individual people and as a society; and if we aren't careful, even as Christians this tolerance for sin can creep into our own thinking, and we can begin mollycoddling sin in our own lives. We can give the devil a foothold. We can fudge here and there. In so doing our obedience to Jesus Christ and His Word becomes incomplete; and

incomplete obedience is complete disobedience.

In today's message, I would like to show you a vivid illustration of that from the Old Testament. The seventeenth book of the Bible is a little, lesser-known book called "Esther." It comes right before the books of Job and Psalms, and I'll give you a minute to find it, because it tells about one very evil man who very nearly succeeded in destroying the entire Jewish race. While you're locating it, I'll give you a brief synopsis of the background. The Jewish people, the Israelites, had by the time of Esther been dispersed from the land of Israel and were scattered among the nations. The world was dominated by the Persian Empire. A king named Xerxes was on the throne, and a young Jewish girl named Esther became queen. She had been raised by her uncle Mordecai, a dedicated Jew. In the course of time, however, an archenemy of the Jews, a man named Haman, rose to the position of Prime Minister of Persia and he plotted to do away with Esther, Mordecai, and, in fact, with the entire Jewish population wherever it was found. Let's pick up the story there, in Esther 3:

King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor... When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes (Esther 3:1-6).

In my mind, the first thing you would have noticed about Haman was the grin on his face, toothy, affable, designed for public consumption. But a closer look revealed black eyes cold, mind calculating, and a heart as black as Hitler's. Through smooth manners and Machiavellian moves, he had gained high office; now he wanted to use his power to annihilate the Jewish race. He hated the Jews, and he wanted to destroy them all—every Jewish man, woman, boy, and girl on earth. His determined purpose was to eliminate the Hebrew people from the face of the planet. Why would a personal slight prompt an otherwise calculating man to envision genocide? Why such racial hatred? There is one word in that passage that tells us, that gives us the clue we need. Notice again how Haman is introduced in verse 1: After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles...

Do you see the one word in this verse that explains to us Haman's hatred of the Jews? No? Not sure? Well, to really understand this verse we need to go back to Genesis, to the very beginnings of the Jewish nation. If you have your Bibles, I'd like to ask you to turn with me to some earlier Old Testament passages, beginning with Genesis.

An Old Testament Study

Genesis gives us the story of Abraham, the first Jew and the beginning of the race of the Hebrews. Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless, but God promised to give them a son, Isaac. Isaac in turn had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob became the son of promise, the chosen seed or lineage of the coming Messiah. But Esau's descendants figure prominently in the Old Testament as well. In Genesis 36, we have a listing of Esau's descendants, and notice especially verse 12: Esau's son Eliphaz also had a concubine named Timna, who born him Amalek.

Amalek! Here is a young man, the grandson of Esau, and his name was Amalek. He was evidently a strong-willed, energetic, ambitious young man because verse 16 says he became chief of his tribe. As the years passed, the descendants of Amalek, the Amalekites, grew into a mighty nation, inhabiting the southern portion of Canaan; and, along with all the Canaanites, they became very violent, sensual, and evil beyond degree (Gen. 15:16). They became so evil they placed themselves beyond the call of conscience, and unable to respond to the conviction of God. They became ripe for judgment. Moreover, they harbored a deep animosity for Israel.

Now look with me at Exodus. During the ensuing years, the descendants of Isaac, the Jews, had become enslaved by the Pharaohs of Egypt, and the Lord sent Moses to deliver them from Egyptian brutality and oppression. Now sooner had they left the sands of Egypt and passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea than they were attacked full force by—whom? The Amalekites. Look at Exodus 14. The Israelites escaped from Egypt through the Red Sea. In chapter 15, they paused to worship God who had delivered them. In chapter 16 they were hungry and weary, and the Lord fed them with manna. In Exodus 17, they trudged through the desert, tired and headed toward Mt. Sinai. Then we read in Exodus 17:8-15:

The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands." So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur, went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory

of Amalek from under heaven." Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner. He said, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord. The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.

Well, forty years passed as the older generation of Israelites wandered in the desert. And look at Deuteronomy 25. The Amalekites were still on Moses' mind as he spoke to the young Israelites, the new generation now preparing to inhabit Canaan: Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut. 25:17-19).

The Israelites forgot. There is nothing about the Amalekites in the book of Joshua, and we next see them in Judges. At every point, the descendants of Amalek are tormenting the descendants of Israel. According to Judges 7:12, they were "thick as locusts. They camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore."

The Bleating of Sheep

When Saul became Israel's first king, he "fought valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, delivering Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them" (1 Sam 14:48). But then he, too, forgot. And his failure to condemn the Amalekites ruined his life, wrecked his reign, and, in years to come threatened his nation. The story is told in 1 Samuel 15:1-35

Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them... "

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But the Amalekite sheep and cattle were of high quality, and Saul and his men spared them for their own use. They also spared Agag, king of the Amalekites. When Samuel visited Saul shortly afterward, the king bragged, "I have carried out the Lord's instruction." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear? Why did you not obey the Lord?"

"But I did obey the Lord," Saul said. "I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal." But Samuel replied, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice... "

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Samuel then took a sword and hacked Agag to death, and the Lord was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel.

Later when Saul died a miserable battlefield death, it was an Amalekite who bragged of killing him (2 Sam. 1:8), and although Saul's successor, David, battled and subdued the Amalekites, they still remained a thorn in Israel's side, their evil ways corrupting all who knew them.

Hundreds of years passed, and in the fifth century B. C., the Jews found themselves dispersed throughout a world that is dominated by Persia and its mighty king Xerxes. Prime Minister Haman ascended to power; and triggered by Mordecai's refusal to bow before him, he determined to extinguish the Jewish race once and for all.

That brings us back to our original question. What lay behind Haman's intense, genocidal hatred of the Jews? What turned him into a Hitler? Read again the way he is introduced to us in Scripture, in Esther 3:1: After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.

Haman the Agagite. Descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites whom Samuel had hacked to death over 500 years before. Haman was an Amalekite, a direct descendant of the Amalekite king, Agag. The entire history of the Old Testament, going all the way back to Genesis, stood behind his fanatical hatred of the Jews. And when Mordecai didn't bow before him, it inflamed hundreds of years of fury and very nearly led to a Holocaust of Hitler-like proportions.

The Lesson

The lesson? God repeatedly told his people that the name of the Amalekites was to be blotted out, not to be tolerated, to be remembered no more. They were pure evil, and they were ripe for judgment. But the Jews never fully obeyed the command, and King Saul in particular took a liking to the Amalekite sheep and cattle, and he spared them. He thought he could fudge. He thought he could be 90% obedient. He bragged, "I have carried out the Lord's instruction." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear? Why did you not obey the Lord?" But Samuel replied, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice..."

Incomplete obedience always boomerangs, and the sins we secretly tolerate in our lives can rise up when we least expect it and ravage us. I had a college coach once, Coach Matthews, who told us in class about a boa constrictor he once had for a pet. They had taken it in when just a baby snake and had raised it. It had become the family pet, and they had a cute name for it. But one day, he walked into the nursery to find that the boa constrictor had crawled somehow into the baby's crib, and was coiled around the child. It was squeezing the life from the baby, and it took all of Coach Matthew's strength to pull it away and, in the nick of time, to save his child. He said, "We had thought it a cute thing, a pet; we thought we could control it; but it nearly ruined our lives."

I wonder if someone here today is indulging and tolerating some habit or activity in your life. You think you can control it. You're fudging. You're compromising in some way, morally or spiritually. Ephesians 4:27 says, "Do not give the devil a foothold."

Ron Handley, the head of Fellowship of Christian Athletes, spoke at a conference in New Mexico last week, and he said that the subtlety of sin and of compromise is so great that he meets with a group of friends each Monday and they ask each other these 10 questions:

1. Have you spent daily time in Scriptures and in prayer?
2. Have you had any flirtatious or lustful attitudes, tempting thought or exposed yourself to any explicit materials that would not glorify God?
3. Have you been completely above reproach in your financial dealings?
4. Have you spent quality time with family and friends?
5. Have you done your 100% best in your job, school, etc.?
6. Have you told any half-truths or outright lies, putting yourself in a better light to those around you?
7. Have you shared the Gospel with an unbeliever this week?
8. Have you taken care of your body through daily physical exercise and proper eating and sleeping habits?
9. Have you allowed any person or circumstances to rob you of your joy?
10. Have you lied to us on any of your answers today.

Those are good questions to ask ourselves. The Psalmist prayed that the Lord would search him and know him and see if there were any wicked ways in him. The Bible says that the heart is deceptive above all things and desperately wicked. We have to watch ourselves every day.

The old Puritan Thomas Manton said, "Watch over thyself with a holy suspicion, because thou hast sin within thee, that doth easily beset thee. Therefore consider thy ways, guard thy senses, and keep thy heart."

That, then, is my council to us all. If anyone here is giving the devil a foothold in your life, if your Christian disciplines are slipping, deal with it today. Confess your sin. Let it go. Turn back to the Lord in that area. Get serious about Jesus Christ. Clean out your mental and spiritual closets. And begin serving the Lord with whole-hearted obedience.

For as 2 Chronicles 16:9 says, The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

Verses That Have Helped Me In Preaching

Nehemiah 8:8; 1 Samuel 17:38-39; Matthew 13:34; 1 John 2:20; Luke 6:45

Some time ago I found a cache of old audiocassettes I'd recorded in college, some of them containing a handful of my earliest sermons. I took a deep breath and punched one into my player. As I listened, I was struck by three things: How good the content was (I realized my core message of the Victorious Life in Christ hasn't changed over the years), how terrible the delivery was, and

how little I've improved!

Through the years, I've read book after book in an effort to become a better preacher, and maybe in reality I have gotten a little better. All the books have helped, as have the advice, the critics, the practice sessions, and the benefit of doing something several times a week, year after year. But one book has helped more than any other—the best homiletics text of them all—the Bible.

Tonight I'd like to share some verses that have helped me be a better preacher. I'm doing this for two reasons. First, it will help you understand the pulpit ministry of this church a little better; second, many of the things I've learned are transferable to you in your own professional or spiritual situation.

Nehemiah 8:8

My favorite verse in all the Bible on the subject of preaching is Nehemiah 8:8. In this passage, the remnant of the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem assembled before the Water Gate for a service of reading and preaching the Word of God. Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion (verse 4). Verse 5 says: Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! 'Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. The Levites... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

And how did they do it? What was their method? How did they go about this craft of preaching? Verse 8 says: They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

In this instance, my favorite translation is the old King James: So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

Ruth Bell Graham, when asked for advice about preaching, once said, "Preach expository sermons, keep them short, and use a lot of illustrations."

When I heard that as a newly-committed Christian I wasn't sure what expository sermons were, so I began doing some investigating. An exposition sermon, in its classic sense, is taking a paragraph of the Bible, reading it distinctly, giving the sense, and causing the people to understand it.

The early Bible translator William Tyndale wrote, "I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text..."

Why a paragraph? Because in literature the paragraph is the shortest segment of contextualized content. If you preach from only a verse, it is easy to take it out of context. You cannot accurately interpret a sentence or a verse of Scripture except with an awareness of its context, which is the paragraph in which it's contained. By exposing (giving exposition) the paragraph as a whole, we increase the likelihood of accurately interpreting and explaining the individual verses and sentences.

Why a paragraph instead of a chapter or a book? It's short enough to cover in a careful way. Through the years, I've primarily been a "paragraph preacher," for that lends itself to exposition, but I'm in the minority. Few preachers still embrace paragraph exposition as their "default" method of preaching, and many people in the pew do not have a clue as to what an expository sermon really is.

I remember when, in my first pastorate, I announced I was going to preach expository sermons. Afterward one of the men came to me very confused. He thought I'd said "Suppository sermons" and he wanted to know how I was going to deliver them!

Since then I've tried to use the term "Expositional Sermons."

How do we prepare an expositional sermon? No one has ever put it better than Stephen Olford, who divides the process into five steps. We must: (1) Memorize the Scripture; (2) Crystallize the Subject; (3) Analyze the Structure; (4) Organize the Substance; and (5) Finalize the Sermon.

Well, actually, one person did put it better than that. The writer of Nehemiah 8:8 said, So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. It's as simple as that.

1 Samuel 17:38-39

Another passage that has helped me is 1 Samuel 17:38-39: Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. "I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them." So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the

Philistine.

This has been one of my most difficult lessons, but I've slowly learned through the years that I cannot preach like any other person. I cannot preach using another's style or delivery. I have to be myself and do it the way that it comes naturally for me.

I don't know why this has been so hard; but I know that as a young man, both insecure and impressionable, I became a composite of the handful of preachers I most admired. I preached like whoever I'd heard most recently. Only slowly have I developed the ability of sliding off the armor of another and going forth with my own method and style of delivery.

One of the preachers I've appreciated through the years has been the Southern Baptist giant, W. A. Criswell. When he died recently, I saw an interview in which he told of his call to the First Baptist Church of Dallas. His predecessor, Dr. George Truett, a pulpit giant, had pastored that church for decades. No one thought that anyone could take Dr. Truett's place. But young W. A. Criswell came and led First Baptist into its greatest days.

In this interview, Dr. Criswell explained one reason why he had been successful. He said something to this effect: Dr. Truett was a proper and dignified preacher who quietly stood in the pulpit and, with well-modulated tones, delivered profound messages. Criswell then said, as I remember it, "When I came I was not at all like that. I screamed and shouted and hollered and waved my fists and beat the pulpit. I'd ramble across the platform and down onto the floor. It wasn't a dignified "city" delivery, but one thing is for sure—no one ever accused me of being a 'Little Truett.' And that's why I lasted 48 years."

I hope there is never another preacher like me (a sentiment shared by others). Every preacher is an original. God has never been in the cloning business. Everyone and everything that He makes is unique. God has never made two snowflakes alike, or two planets, or two daffodils, or two preachers.

Of course, this presents a difficulty. How can we learn from others, how can we listen to them, how can we study them, how can we benefit from them without running the risk of unconsciously picking up their specific methods or mannerisms?

We must deliberately and consciously avoid any tendency toward imitating the style of another. I wish that early in my training someone had said to me, "Listen to the greatest preachers in the world, but make sure that you don't stylistically pattern yourself after them. Don't adopt their distinctive mannerisms, voice modulations, particular pronunciations, or characteristic phrases or gestures. By yourself!"

In his autobiography, hotelier Conrad Hilton told of being elected to the state legislature as a young man. He was nervous about giving his first speech, and he invested much time in study and practice, complete with pre-planned dramatic gestures. One evening, his mother overheard him practicing as, with a flourish, he ended with a dramatic recitation of "The Charge of the Light Brigade," hands flying through the air like trapezes.

"Very nice," she replied, "for poetry. But... you'll have to unlearn all this."

"But Mother," he protested. He reminded her that all the great speakers of the day were filled with rhetoric and oratory.

"Connie," she replied, "all those trimmings are sinful. You are hiding yourself behind a lot of gestures. If you're afraid to be you, son, you're throwing dust in God's face. He made you. If you have confidence in Him, you'll relax and be just what you are. You'd do better to pray about it than to practice this." Whereupon she walked off with his oratory textbook.

Hilton later said, "On the opening day of the legislature, I did pray about it. I faced the crowd, kept my hands at my side and my mouth in a normal line, and said simply what I had to say and sat down. It worked out very well that day. It has ever since. And any time, if I've been tempted to phony it up a bit, I remember that that's lack of confidence in Him, and I'll look pretty silly throwing dust in the face of the Infinite."

May God give us all such mothers, wives, friends, or critics.

Our preaching should not be unlike our natural conversation. In his book, *A Preacher's Life*, the old British pulpiteer, Joseph Parker, told of a beloved preacher of his era, a man named Norman Macleod, who was older and somewhat of a mentor. Dr. Parker, 32 at the time, asked the venerable Dr. Macleod to come to his church in Manchester and preach one Sunday. That morning when Dr. Macleod opened the vestry door and saw the great size of the building, he stepped back into the vestry and said, "In what tone must I speak in order to fill that space?" Parker replied, "Adopt a conversational base, and rise and fall just as you feel your sentiment requires." Later, in recalling the sermon, Dr. Parker said, "The great man talked to us, talked straight into our hearts."

"Preaching," said Joseph Parker, "should be conversation at its best."

Charles Spurgeon said the same thing to his students: "Just go into the pulpit, and talk to the people as you would in the kitchen, or the drawing-room, and say what you have to tell them in your ordinary tone of voice.... Nothing can succeed with the masses except

naturalness and simplicity.”

Now, of course, there is considerable difference between having a discussion with two people and presenting a discourse to two hundred or two thousand. But, in general, one’s preaching style should not be too different from his or her conversational style, and a conversational sort of delivery, it seems to me, is always the most natural.

I can improve, of course. I can grow. I can get better. I can mature. But I can’t be someone that God didn’t intend me to be. I need to like myself and to be confident in the gifts and personality and preaching style that God has built into me. We’ve got to be natural in the pulpit. If a person seldom gestures in normal everyday conversation, you probably wouldn’t expect many gestures in the pulpit.

Or vice versa. There’s a story about an old Jewish peddler who was ambling down a street in Tel Aviv carrying two large watermelons. A tourist stopped him to ask, “Where is Ben Yehuda Street?” The peddler answered, “Please hold these two watermelons.” The tourist managed to get them in his arms, and that allowed the peddler to make an expansive gesture with his hands and exclaim, “How should I know?”

Acts 26:1 in the Living Bible says, Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Go ahead. Tell us your story.” So Paul, with many gestures, presented his defense...

Fight in your own armor, preach in your own style, and be an original. That’s the only kind of effective preachers there are.

Matthew 13:34

There is one preacher, however, whom we should emulate. Matthew 13:34 says: Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable.

There are three good reasons to season one’s sermons with parables, stories, and illustrations. First, they wake up people who have drifted off during the more didactic portions of the message. Second, they keep children tuned in. Third, illustrations enable people to see the practicality of what is being preached. Through the use of stories, illustrations, and quotes people see themselves as in a mirror and are better able to personalize the truth of Scripture.

Spurgeon said: “Don’t forget to give them a few anecdotes. Anecdotes are very much objected to by critics of sermons, who say they ought not be used in the pulpit. But some of us know better than that; we know what will wake a congregation up.”

1 John 2:20

There is an old word, disdained by newer translators and ignored in homiletics books, but beloved in olden days. The King James rendering of 1 John 2:20 says: But ye have an unction from the Holy One. The Greek word, *chrisma* (*chrisma*, *khriś'-mah*) literally means an unguent (ointment) or smearing; it conveyed the idea of rubbing an ointment into the skin. In terms of preaching, it is a special anointing of the Holy Spirit on the message and on the messenger of God, the power, the life-transforming endowment, the unction.

“This divine unction,” writes E. M. Bounds, “is the feature which separates and distinguishes true gospel preaching from all other methods of presenting the truth and which creates a wide spiritual chasm between the preacher who has it and the one who has it not.”

Bounds devotes a chapter in his classic *Preacher and Prayer* to this subject, pointing out that earnestness is often mistaken for unction. “Earnestness and unction look alike from some points of view.... Earnestness may be sincere, serious, ardent, and persevering. It goes at a thing with good will, pursues it with perseverance, and urges it with an ardor; puts force in it. But all these forces do not rise higher than mere human effort....”

Uction, on the other hand, “...is the sweetest exhalation of the Holy Spirit. It impregnates, suffuses, softens, percolates, cuts, and soothes. It carries the Word like dynamite, like salt, like sugar; makes the Word a soother, an arraigner, a revealer, a searcher; makes the hearer a culprit or a saint, makes him weep like a child and live like a giant.”

Genuine unction, says Bounds, “comes to the preacher not in the study but in the closet.”

Luke 6:45

Finally, I’ve recently taken Luke 6:45 as my golden rule of preaching: Out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. In other words, preaching is overflow. I shouldn’t go to the Bible looking for sermons; I go for my own refreshment, enjoyment, and benefit. I drink from on rivers of God as recorded in His revelation, and the congregation gets the overflow. This is Psalm 23 preaching, when our cup overfloweth.

The other day during my quiet time, I found two verses I’d never before connected. In John 4:14 Jesus told the Samaritan woman,

“...whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life.”

Sometime later, Jesus added to His metaphor: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38). The water of life wells up within us, then spills over and becomes rivers of living water, irrigating and refreshing a drought-stricken world. That is preaching!

Paul loved this concept of the overflowing life:

· For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!—Romans 5:15

· May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit—Romans 15:13

· For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows...—2 Corinthians 1:5

· All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God—2 Corinthians 4:15

· ...so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me—Philippians 1:26

· ...overflowing with thankfulness—Colossians 2:6

· May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you—1 Thessalonians 3:12

As it relates to preaching, this is beautifully expressed in Francis Ridley Havergal’s 1872 hymn, the prayer of all who wish to be expositional, natural, illustrative, anointed, and overflowing bearers of the Word:

Lord, speak to me that I may speak

In living echoes of Thy tone;

As Thou has sought, so let me seek

Thine erring children lost and lone.

O lead me, Lord, that I may lead

The wandering and the wavering feet;

O feed me, Lord, that I may feed

Thy hungering ones with manna sweet.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach

The precious things Thou dost impart;

And wing my words, that they may reach

The hidden depths of many a heart.

O fill me with Thy fullness, Lord,

Until my very heart overflow

In kindling thought and glowing word,

Thy love to tell, Thy praise to show.

O use me, Lord, use even me,

Just as Thou wilt, and when, and where,

Until Thy blessed face I see,

Thy rest, Thy joy, Thy glory share.

What Time I Am Afraid

1 Samuel 21; Psalm 56; Psalm 34

This week in my personal Bible study I was struck by seven words in Psalm 37:8: Do Not Fret—It Only Causes Harm. I'd like to take up that theme with you this morning by looking at three interrelated passages of Scripture.

1 Samuel 21

That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath (in Philistine territory). But the servants of Achish said to him, "Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?'" David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath. So he pretended to be insane in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard. Achish said to his servants, "Look at this man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?" David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam (1 Samuel 21:10-22:1)

Robert Orben, the comedy writer, recently said, "Sometimes I get the feeling the whole world is against me, but deep down I know that's not true. Some of the smaller countries are neutral."

Well, for David none of the smaller countries were neutral. The whole world was against him. In the passage today, we see him as a young man whose world had fallen apart. Through no fault of his own, he suddenly found himself unwanted by his own countrymen and being pursued by the Israeli Army. (How would you like the Israeli Army and the Mossad after you?) Running out of places to hide, David flew across the border into enemy territory, into Gath of the Philistines. In so doing he jumped from the frying pan into the fire. He had apparently hoped he wouldn't be recognized by the Philistines—he had, after all, killed their national hero, Goliath—but he was recognized, and his life hung by a thread. It would be as if you were being chased by the Israeli Army, and you fled across the border and were captured by Iraqi soldiers who dragged before Saddam Hussein to see what he would do with you. That is exactly the condition David found himself in.

It says in this passage that David took matters to heart and was very much afraid. In other words, he was engulfed in fear, worry, and anxiety.

One of the observations frequently made about President Bill Clinton is his ability to compartmentalize his thinking during a crisis. Just when you think he would be incapacitated by worry and engulfed in crisis, he gives a brilliant State of the Union speech, or he goes to church with a relaxed wave and a smile to the crowds, or he stands head to head with another head-of-state to focus international issues, or he discusses Social Security with an incredible grasp of statistics and facts. He seems to keep the crisis contained in one compartment of his mind without allowing it to bleed over into the other areas of his life.

But most of us can't do that. Someone defined worry as a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. That's the way it is with me. When I become anxious about something, it affects every other part of my life.

Well, the Bible's great antidote for worry is prayer. Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." This has always been the secret of victorious Christians. I was reading the other day the remarks of Mike Singletary as he was inducted into the Football Hall of Fame. Singletary grew up in the ghetto of Houston. There were ten kids in the family, and times were hard, especially after Mike's father abandoned them. Six months later, the oldest child, Grady, was hit and killed by a drunk driver. Everyone wondered how Mike's mother could sustain such a large family with virtually no income, how she could keep her home together and raise her children. Mike said, "She responded the only way true champions respond: On the knees."

Psalm 56

Christians respond to the worries and crises of life on our knees. And in David's case in 1 Samuel 21, he went to his knees twice. There are two different prayers recorded in the Psalms and attributed to this moment in his life. The first is Psalm 56, the superscription of which tells us that this is a prayer of David "when the Philistines had seized him in Gath."

/Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack. My slanders pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride. When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" (Ps 56:1-4).

Notice here that he prayed in faith. He was in deep trouble, but he prayed in faith. James 5 talks about "the prayer of faith," or "the

prayer offered in faith." In praying, David didn't collapse into a frantic fit of hand-wringing and hopelessness, but he seemed to know he was speaking to his God and that his God could deliver him. "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid..."

And the Lord did deliver him in a most unique way. There's nothing like this in the Bible, but the Lord put it into David's mind to feign insanity. So he put on the performance of his life, pretending to be insane, scribbling on the gateposts and letting his saliva trickle down his beard. The king of Gath was disgusted and said, "I have enough insane people around me already; get him out of here." David escaped with his life. It was a crazy scheme, but it worked. The Lord delivered him.

Psalm 34

And that's when David went to his knees again to compose another prayer, the one I want to focus on today, Psalm 34:1-7. Notice again the superscription: Of David, When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left. 1 Samuel calls the king Achish, but that was his personal name. Abimelech was his dynastic name, so this is speaking of the same incident, the one recorded in 1 Samuel 21.

The first three verses are an expression of exuberant praise: I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.

And 1Sa 21:4-7 tell us why. Here the Psalmist sums up God's mercies toward him, telling us that when he sought the Lord and cried out to Him, that God did four things. He answered in four ways.

He Delivers Us From All Our Fears

First, the Lord delivers us from all our fears. Ps 34:4: I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. The essence of worry is fear—we are afraid of what may happen to us or to those we love. The Bible never promises to keep us from fearful situations, but it does promise to deliver us from fear in those situations. Psalm 23 says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." The three Hebrew children in Daniel's book were thrown into the fiery furnace, but the Fourth Man came down to be with them. The Lord sent the disciples into a storm tossed sea, but the Master of Sky and Sea walked across the water to be with them. Isaiah 41 says, "Fear thou not, for I am with thee." And David said in the Psalm we're already looked at, "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee."

Allan Emery is a Christian businessman who started out his career by inheriting his father's wool and textile empire. In the early days, he used to go on wool buying trips, and one evening he spent the night with a shepherd on the Texas prairie. It was a very quiet and peaceful night until suddenly the coyotes' long and mournful cry pierced the air. Emery started, and he looked out over the fields. The shepherd's dogs growled and peered into the darkness. The sheep, which had been sleeping, lumbered to their feet, alarmed, bleating pitifully. The shepherd got up and tossed more logs onto the fire, and the flames shot up. In the glow, Allen looked out and saw thousands of little lights. He realized that it was the reflection of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. It dawned on him that in the midst of danger, the sheep were not looking out into the darkness but were keeping their eyes set in the direction of their shepherd.

"I sought the Lord," says Psalm 34:4, "and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears."

He Makes Our Faces Radiant

Second, as we cry out to the Lord and take our burdens and worries to him, praying with faith, he takes the anxious lines and the downcast expressions of our faces and replaces them with radiance. The next verse, verse five, says: Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

You know, the Bible says that we should dress modestly; and I think one of the reasons is this: The Lord wants people's attention drawn to our faces, for he intends for the expressions on our countenances to be a witness for him.

Exodus 34 says that when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, "behold, the skin of his face shone." Job said that before he was brought low by the weight of his multiplied problems, people sought him out because of the expression on his face. "The light of my face was precious to them," he recalled in Job 29:24. Ecclesiastes 8:1 says, "Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance." Psalm 42:11 says that God is "the help of my countenance and my God" (NKJV). Proverbs 15:13 says, "A happy heart makes the face cheerful." It says about Stephen, "And all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him saw his face as it had been the face of an angel."

I know a man who goes to this church, and he has been through many difficult problems. But whenever I stand up to preach, I see his face. He has a gentle and affirming smile, and all the time I'm preaching he is smiling and listening and nodding in affirmation. And it has been an encouragement to me for over 18 years of pulpit ministry here.

There's nothing wrong with a touch of make-up here and there—even an old barn benefits from a fresh coat of paint. But the most expensive cosmetics in the world provide little help for a face that never shines with the gentle joy of Jesus. 2 Peter 3 says, Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.

Sometimes I know the expression on my face communicates anger or anxiety. I know that sometimes my countenance is worried and tense and downcast. But I hope that when I take my burdens to the Lord and lay them before his throne, I can leave my prayer closet with an expression of confidence, peace, and joy.

There's a famous story about Martin Luther, that he became so weighed down and burdened about his many cares and pressures, that his countenance became weary and haggard. He went about the house brooding and melancholic. One day he came down for breakfast to find his wife Katharina dressed in black, in a widow's weed, a garment of mourning. When he greeted her, she said not a word. "What is wrong, Katie?" he asked.

"Someone has died," she said. "Who?" asked her alarmed husband. She replied, "God has died."

Martin Luther roared at her, "Woman, that is a terrible heresy. God is not dead nor doth he sleep. Never say that the Eternal has died. When heaven and earth shall pass away, God will remain."

"Then why do you awaken each morning with such a doleful expression on your face," she asked him. "You go through the day sighing like the north wind. In your university classes you claim to interpret the mind of God. You have appeared to know him well; and I became certain, from the expression on your face, that God must surely have expired."

She said all that without a change in her expression. Suddenly Martin broke out laughing. "You have convinced me, Katie, dear," he said. "So if you ever see me again with a melancholy countenance, remind me that God is living, that he will live forever."

Psalm 34 says, "Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."

He Saves Us From Our Troubles

Third, not only does the Lord deliver us from our fears and make our faces radiant, he saves us out of our troubles. Ps 34:6 says, "This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles."

He doesn't promise to prevent troubles, but to work them out for good in our lives. "In this world you will have tribulation," said Jesus. "But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Every joy or trial falleth from above,

Traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love.

We may trust Him fully all for us to do;

They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.

Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest

Finding as he promised perfect peace and rest.

He Stations His Angels Around Us

Finally, the Lord stations his angels around us. Verse 7 says: The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. I was reading this week the account of a Free Will Baptist preacher here in Nashville around the turn of the century. He recorded his life's story in a little booklet, and Chuck Sherrill found it in the Tennessee State Library and sent me a photocopy. The preacher's name was C. H. Pickle, and he helped start many of our denominational churches here in Middle Tennessee. Rev. Pickle had many interesting experiences. For example, he wrote that one night he was very burdened to know for certain that he was in the Lord's will and he earnestly prayed for confirmation from heaven. That night after going to bed, "an unusually happy feeling came over me. I looked with an eye of faith to the Lord and I could see the all-seeing eye of God looking down into my soul. I felt like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, that it was good to be here, for I was in the immediate presence of Jehovah. It seemed that the power of the Lord would kill me, it was so great. And just then, to add to my rapture, I heard a rustling of wings and I said, 'Surely, this is an angel the Lord has sent to comfort me.' I had read in the thirty-fourth Psalm and seventh verse that the Angel of the Lord encampth around them that fear him and delivereth them. The angel stayed with me all night till about an hour before day... and from that night to present time I have never doubted my call to preach."

I've never actually heard the rustle of angels' wings in my room, but the Bible does say that sometimes we entertain angels unawares, that they are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14).

This entire passage has been a great comfort to me this week as I've had a hard time taking my middle child off to college. But I keep going back to Psalm 31-37, and this portion of Scripture has given me comfort, this Psalm 34 in particular. And I've asked the Lord to station his angels around my daughter, to guide her, to go before her, to keep her from danger and from evil. And I've asked the Lord to turn my worry into worship, and my burdens into blessings.

So this is my message for you today. We sometimes find ourselves beset with worry and anxiety like David in 1 Samuel 21, with things going from bad to worse. But we can call to the Lord as he did in Psalm 56. And when we come through the blood of Jesus Christ to the Throne of Grace, crying out to the Lord, when we cast our cares on Him, he does what he promises in Psalm 34. He delivers us from our fears, he makes our faces radiant, he saves us out of all our troubles, and he sends his angels to set up camp around us. And we can then say with the Psalmist:

What time I am afraid, I will trust in you.

The Witch Of Endor

1 Samuel 28

This is the third message in our series "Double, Double, Toil, and Trouble," on the subject of what the Bible says about witchcraft. Our first message was devoted to the person of Jesus Christ, to his matchless power and absolute victory. He has been given a name that is above every name, and he is seated at the right hand of glory far above all power and principality and authority. Our second message was an overview of the Bible's view of witchcraft, sorcery, and the occult. Now today I would like to speak on the subject of the witch of Endor.

If you go to Maple Ridge, British Columbia you'll come to one of the most famous restaurants in Canada. It's a pub, and it takes its name from an old public house in 18th Century London. The name is The Witch of Endor.

If you are a patron of the opera you might know of a director named Travis Preston. One of his most famous productions is entitled Saul and the Witch of Endor.

If you attend a music festival featuring works written by George Frideric Handel, you might hear his oratorio about Saul and the Witch of Endor.

If you visit the great art museums of Europe, you'll see many paintings labeled "Saul and the Witch of Endor" by artists from all periods of history.

If you are a fan of Mark Twain, you may know that he has a short story entitled "Curious Relic for Sale" about the Witch of Endor.

Who is this most famous witch in history, this witch on Endor who has so intrigued readers and students of the Bible? Well, we need to work our way up to that question by looking at the Old Testament king named Saul. Let's begin our study in the book of 1 Samuel 9 as I show you five things about Saul, the first king of Israel.

His Charisma Was Obvious

First, Saul was a young man whose charisma was obvious. 1 Samuel 9 begins: There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zerror, the son of Becorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. He had a son named Saul, an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others.

This young man had been created by God with impressive physical qualities, and he radiated a magnetism that others could only envy. I tried to think of an actor who would be perfect for the role of Saul. I thought of Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Damon, but they aren't tall enough. I thought of Mel Gibson, but he is too old. Just think of the hottest young hunk in the movies, and you'll have a picture of this young man Saul.

The Lord made him perfect for the leadership role for which he had been born. God makes all of us just the way he wants us to be for what he wants us to do. Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared us in advance for us to do." I want you to know that you have certain strengths that God wants to use. He gave you those strengths, and he gave you those gifts. Every one of you.

His Calling Was Noble

The second thing to notice about Saul was that his calling was noble. Look at 1 Samuel 10: Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, "Has not the Lord anointed you leader over his inheritance... As Saul turned to

leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart..."

The Lord wanted to choose Saul and to use Saul to play an important role in his kingdom. In a similar way, God has a purpose and a plan for your life. What if we had to go through life without a sense of purpose or meaning? I read about a man the other day who said that he has boiled down all his questions about life into one four-word sentence: "What is the point?" The English writer Aldous E. Huxley once said, "Sooner or later, one asks even of Beethoven, even of Shakespeare... 'Is this all?'" The Bible says that God has set eternity in our hearts, and we instinctively feel that we are made for something special, for a significant purpose. When we commit our lives to Jesus Christ and grow in the knowledge of him and of his word, God shows us what he wants us to do. He guides us. He promises to use us to accomplish his will in this world. We become partners with him in his enterprise.

His Career Was Promising

Third, Saul's career was promising. Look at 1 Samuel 11:11: The next day Saul separated his men into three divisions; during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together. And verse 15 says that after this remarkable military victory, All the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the Lord. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.

The young King Saul got off to a great start, leading Israel into much-needed military victory over the enemies that had been long tormenting them, and he won the respect and admiration of all the people.

His Character Was Flawed

This could have been one of the greatest and most uplifting stories of the Bible, but the story of Saul quickly headed south. Although Saul's charisma was obvious, his calling noble, and his career promising, his character was flawed.

A couple of years ago, Dick Morris was one of the most powerful men in Washington, intimate advisor to President Bill Clinton. Then the news came out that he was caught in a sex scandal, and he very quickly fell from power. In the Detroit newspaper, Morris later explained what had happened to him. He said, "I started out being excited working for the president. Then I became arrogant, then I became grandiose, and then I became self-destructive." He said that it happened because he had "a fundamental flaw in my character, a fundamental weakness in my personality, a fundamental sin, if you will. I'm prone to being infatuated with power and believing that the rules don't apply to me."

That describes King Saul to a "T".

This week the former Presidential advisor and wonder boy George Stephanopoulos published his behind-the-scenes look at the Clinton White House, and it is not very flattering. Stephanopoulos is disillusioned and disappointed, and the last sentence of his book says, "I wonder what might have been if only this good president had been a better man."

That describes perfectly what happened to King Saul. What exploits he might have accomplished, what victories he might have won, what history he might have made, what advances he might have made for the Kingdoms of Israel and of God if only he had been a better man.

We don't have time to trace the entire story, but in simplest terms, Saul failed to trust and to obey God. He let himself lapse into sin. And he began a long, slow, painful, shameful slide into despair. Look at 1 Samuel 13:13—"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command."

This is why we must never tolerate on-going sin in our lives. This is why we must never rationalize our weaknesses or sweep our iniquities under the rug. God wants to perfect that which concerns us. He is Jehovah M'Kaddesh—the God who sanctifies. When we are really serious about following him, he matures and develops us into his own image. The Bible says that he who has begun a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

His Crown Was Lost

But Saul wouldn't cooperate with the Lord. He continually disobeyed, ever more deeply, until in the end his confidence was gone. On the last full day of his life, he was despairing and despondent, frightened and unfocused. He had lost his relationship with the Lord, Samuel his mentor was dead, and his archenemies the Philistines were encircling him. In his extreme distress, he turned to the occult and consulted the witch of Endor.

Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in his own town at Ramah. Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritualists from the land. The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunned, while Saul gathered all

the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. 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. Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." "There is one in Endor," they said.

So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name." But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this." Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" "Bring up Samuel," he said.

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a spirit coming out of the ground." "What does he look like?" he asked. "An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?"

"I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do." Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the Lord has turned away from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. Because you did not obey the Lord or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the Lord has done this to you today. The Lord will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines."

Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and night. When the woman came to Saul and saw that he was greatly shaken, she said, "Look, your maidservant has obeyed you. I took my life in my hands and did what you told me to do. Now please listen to your servant and let me give you some food so you may eat and have strength to go on your way." He refused and said, "I will not eat." But his men joined the woman in urging him, and he listened to them. He got up from the ground and sat on the couch. The woman had a fattened calf at the house, which she butchered at once. She took some flour, kneaded it and baked bread without yeast. Then she set it before Saul and his men, and they ate. That same night they got up and left (1 Samuel 28:3-25).

The most interesting thing to me about this witch is this: She was dreadfully surprised and frightened when the image of Samuel actually appeared before her. This meant that her previous seances and in her previous attempts to communicate with the dead had apparently been some kind of natural or supernatural hoax. She had evidently done one of two things in practicing her skills.

- Maybe she had used demons and satanic powers to produce images that looked or sounded like people who were returning from the dead. 2 Thessalonians 2:9 says that the devil has the ability to produce "lying wonders" (KJV) and "counterfeit miracles" (NIV).
- Maybe she had just used "hocus-pocus"—trickery and deception.

In any event, she was as startled as anybody when the Lord allowed Samuel to actually return to the realm of the earthly living to deliver a final message of doom to King Saul. The final result—Saul's crown was lost. Look at 1 Samuel 31:

Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically... So Saul took his own sword and fell on it... So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day. The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head and stripped off his armor... and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

Turn to the next page, to 2 Samuel 1. Here David hears of Saul's death, and he composes a song of mourning, a lament. He says: O mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, nor fields that yield offerings of grain, for there the shield of the mighty was defiled.

Last week, we visited Beth Shan where Saul's body was nailed to the wall, and we gazed over at Mount Gilboa where Saul was slain. To this day, the nation of Israel keeps a portion of this mountain barren, treeless, and desolate in fulfillment of this cry of David and in memory of the first king of Israel.

Saul's charisma was obvious, his calling noble, his career obvious. But his character was flawed and his crown was lost.

The Lord loves you and he wants to do something special with your life. But inner corruption, outward compromise, and spiritual carelessness can drain away your confidence and steal away your crown. The witch of Endor is not your friend. Stay away from her. Commit yourself without reservation or hesitation to Jesus Christ. Draw near to God, and begin living a life worthy of the calling you

have received.

THE ABCS OF LEADERSHIP

1 Samuel 30

H. Gordon Selfridge, who established one of the world's largest department stores in London, claimed that his success came about because he never thought of himself as anyone's boss. He didn't like the word 'Boss.' He thought of himself as a leader. What's the difference? Here's the way he put it:

- The boss drives his people; the leader coaches them.
- The boss depends upon authority; the leader depends on good will.
- The boss inspires fear; the leader inspires enthusiasm.
- The boss says "I"; the leader says "we."
- The boss fixes blame for the breakdown; the leader fixes the breakdown.
- The boss says "Go"; the leader says "Let's go!"

Well, today we're going to look at one of the most remarkable and successful leaders in political, military, and biblical history—the man David, and he fits that profile very nicely. We're concluding a four-part series of studies on the subject of leadership and influence as it is profiled for us in the book of 1 Samuel. This book revolves around the story of three leaders—Samuel, Saul, and David. The first was a dependable leader, the second a defective leader, and today we'll study David, a developing leader. Look with me at 1 Samuel 30:

Now it happened, when David and his men came to Ziklag, on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the South and Ziklag, attacked Ziklag and burned it with fire, 2 and had taken captive the women and those who were there, from small to great; they did not kill anyone, but carried them away and went their way. 3 So David and his men came to the city, and there it was, burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive. 4 Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep. 5 And David's two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, had been taken captive. 6 Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God (NKJV).

Adversity (1Sa 30:1-6a)

The "A" of leadership here is adversity. Sometimes problems come in devastating waves, and I believe it's the devil's attempt to destroy us. In this passage, everything that could go wrong had gone wrong for David. His nation had rejected him, the armies of Israel were pursuing him, the Philistines had rebuffed him, his family had been kidnapped, and his own men wanted to stone him.

Any one of those things would have devastated you or me. Just think about it. How would you feel if you suddenly discovered that federal troops had been dispatched to kill you? If you had lost your job and your home? If your family had been kidnapped? If your friends literally wanted you dead? All those things were happening all at once to this young man, and he broke down emotionally, weeping until every tear had been drained from him and he had no more strength to weep.

There are people in this church going through incredible adversity right now. I have friends in other states who have recently encountered a series of difficulties which seem unsolvable. Are you encountering adversity right now? Well, then, let's go on to "B."

Belief (1Sa 30:6b)

Verse 6 says that David strengthened himself in the Lord. I believe that is just about the greatest thing written in the entire Bible about David. In the midst of his adversity—and, really, because of it—David learned the all-important technique of strengthening himself in the Lord. This might be the greatest of all skills for a Christian leader.

Now, earlier in 1 Samuel, when David had previously been in emotional trouble, it says that his friend Jonathan had come and strengthened his hand in the Lord. But now, Jonathan couldn't come. David didn't have anyone to lean on; and that forced him to strengthen himself in the Lord. It's wonderful when we have a friend to encourage us, but sometimes we just have to strengthen ourselves in the Lord.

Do you know how to do that? The ability, the technique, of encouraging ourselves in the Lord marks the difference between the strong and the weak, between the stable and the wobbly person.

What does it mean to “strengthen ourselves in the Lord?” How do we do it? The technique of strengthening ourselves in the Lord is the mental, emotional, and spiritual discipline of taking charge of our thoughts and intentionally bringing them into line with the power, promises, and presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes we have to do that by sheer will-power. We force ourselves to take charge of our thoughts and bring them into line with the power, promises, and presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We know from studying David’s life that whenever he encountered adversity, he would go into the Scripture—all he had was the Law, the first books of the Bible—and David would find those truths about God that met his needs, and he would claim the promises of God that fit his circumstances. Then he would apply those truths and promises to his current situation in an attitude of praise and worship. That is how he strengthened himself in the Lord.

Let me show you how this worked out. Just look at the fifties in the Psalms—Psalm 50-59, and I’ll give you some illustrations. Notice the subtitles to these Psalms:

- Psalm 52: A contemplation of David when Doeg the Edomite went and told Saul, and said to him, “David has gone to the house of Ahimelech.” This was a particularly tragic story in which David unwittingly caused the death of an entire village because of the treachery of a man named Doeg.
- Psalm 54: A contemplation of David when the Ziphites went and said to Saul, “Is David not hiding with us.”
- Psalm 56: A Michtam of David when the Philistines captured him in Gath.
- Psalm 57: A Michtam of David when he fled from Saul into the cave.
- Psalm 59: A Michtam of David when Saul sent men, and they watched over the house in order to kill him.

Every crisis became for David an occasion for taking control of his runaway thoughts, bringing them into line with God’s Word, and turning his problems into prayers, his worry into worship, and his heartaches into hymns.

I’ve just finished the manuscript for a book of stories of our greatest hymns, and I was amazed at how many of them were written out of adversity.

For example, there is a well-known old hymn entitled “Jesus Never Fails.” The words say, “Heaven and earth may pass away, but Jesus never fails.” Well, it was written by a man who was learning this very technique of “strengthening himself in the Lord.” In the 1920s, Arthur Luther was a pianist for an evangelistic team that would go into the mountains and countryside holding week-long revivals and evangelistic rallies. On one trip, the team traveled by narrow-gauge railroad into the Kentucky mountains for services in the town of Somerset, which was literally at the end of the line. The train only reached Somerset once a week.

A couple of days into the meetings, an urgent telegram arrived. Arthur’s son had been rushed to the hospital in serious condition from an unknown illness. Art’s world seemed to stop, and his first reaction was to panic. He was 600 miles from home, with no easy way out of the hills. He later recalled: “I would either have to walk the many dangerous miles down the mountain or wait some four or five days before the train could take me out.”

Well, what did he do? In recounting the incident, Arthur Luther wrote, “In the little Kentucky home where I was staying I began to collect my thoughts and to talk to the Lord, for I knew He alone had the answer to my dilemma. Perhaps from force of habit, I sat down at the piano and found myself playing a new melody to a truth that came flashing into my mind—‘Jesus Never Fails!’ I repeated the phrase, and then came ‘Heaven and earth may pass away, but Jesus never fails.’

“When I finished, a peace had settled over my anxious heart. I knew the God who never fails would soon find the answer; and He did, for just then there was a knock at the door and someone came with the news—word had just been received over the telegraph wire that my son had passed the crisis and all was well!”

I think the Lord might perhaps allow the crisis to teach us how to strengthen ourselves in the Lord. He wants to teach us to trust

Him, to believe Him. Adversity leads to Belief. And the “C” stands for “Calm.”

Calmness (1Sa 30:6b-7a)

When David took control of his thoughts and reminded himself that, as we would say, Jesus never fails, when he took charge of his thoughts and brought them into line with the power, promises, and presence of the Lord., he calmed down enough to think clearly and act wisely. That led to the “D”—Decisiveness! Doing! Action!

Decisiveness (1Sa 30:7-20)

Many times we're paralyzed by fear or grief or depression. We get in such a stew that we can't seem to act. But look at what David did. Verse 7:

Then David said to Abiathar the priest, Ahimelech's son, "Please bring the ephod here to me." And Abiathar brought the ephod to David.

What is the significance of that? What does that mean? You may remember that earlier this year I preached a series of two sermons on the garments of the High Priest as described in the book of Exodus, and we looked at what those garments could teach us about Christ.

Well, the ephod was the apron-like garment that represented the priesthood. The priests wore this ephod like police officers wears their uniforms or a football player wears his jersey. And as a part of that ephod—attached to it—there was a breastpiece which was a piece of fabric into which was set precious stones, and it was folded over. Inside was the famous Urim and Thummim. We don't know exactly what this was or how it worked, but it was a device, perhaps a couple of stones, through which the High Priest could discern the will of God in a particular manner. Some people think it was a set of two stones, one representing “yes” and the other “no.” The High Priest would pray, seek God's direction in a decision, and pull out one of the stones.

At any rate, it was a way of ascertaining God's will in matters of importance, and David needed to know the will of the Lord in this crisis. And the Bible says that when we're in difficulty, if we ask God for wisdom, He will give it to us. And so David called the priest and asked him to use the Urim and Thummim in his ephod to give him direction. Let's read on... 1Sa 30:8-20:

8 So David inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall I pursue this troop? Shall I overtake them?" And He answered him, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake them and without fail recover all."

9 So David went, he and the 600 men who were with him, and came to the Brook Besor, where those stayed who were left behind. 10 But David pursued, he and 400 men; for two hundred stayed behind, who were so weary that they could not cross the Brook Besor.

11 Then they found an Egyptian in the field, and brought him to David; and they gave him bread and he ate, and they let him drink water. 12 And they gave him a piece of a cake of figs and two clusters of raisins. So when he had eaten, his strength came back to him; for he had eaten no bread nor drunk water for three days and three nights. 13 Then David said to him, "To whom do you belong, and where are you from?"

And from this man, David gets intelligence. He gathers the facts he needs to chart his course of action. Now, go to verse 16:

16 And when he had brought him down (to the enemy camp), there they were, spread out over all the land, eating and drinking and dancing, because of all the great spoil which they had taken from the land of the Philistines and from the land of Judah. 17 Then David attacked them from twilight until the evening of the next day. Not a man of them escaped, except 400 young men who rode on camels and fled. 18 So David recovered all that the Amalekites had carried away, and David rescued his two wives. 19 And nothing of theirs was lacking, either small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything which they had taken from them; David recovered all. 20 Then David took all the flocks and herds they had driven before those other livestock, and said, "This is David's spoil."

Do you see the pattern here? Adversity leads to Belief. Belief leads to calm nerves. Calm nerves leads to Doing, to Action. You have a problem, and it almost overwhelms you. Maybe it does overwhelm you. But you take charge of your thoughts and bring them into line with the power, promises, and presence of the Lord. That enables you to calm down enough to think clearly and act wisely. Now, sometimes, as we strengthen ourselves in the Lord, God tells us to do nothing. "Let me handle this," he says. Other times, He wants us to move quickly and decisively. But in all events, He provides the necessary strength and wisdom. As we strengthen ourselves in the Lord, He strengthens us with the needed resolve and wisdom to move ahead.

That leads to the final letter—"E".

Encouragement (1Sa 30:21-31)

You take the strength you have received, and you use it to encourage others. Look at the way this work out in the story. Verse 21ff:

1Sa 30:21 Now David came to the 200 men who had been so weary that they could not follow David, whom they also had made to stay at the Brook Besor. So they went out to meet David and to meet the people who were with him. And when David came near the people, he greeted them. 22 Then all the wicked and worthless men of those who went with David answered and said, "Because they did not go with us, we will not give them any of the spoil that we have recovered, except for every man's wife and children, that they may lead them away and depart."

1Sa 30:23 But David said, "My brethren, you shall not do so with what the Lord has given us, who has preserved us and delivered into our hand the troop that came against us. 24 For who will heed you in this matter? But as his part is who goes down to the battle, so shall his part be who stays by the supplies; they shall share alike." 25 So it was, from that day forward; he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel to this day.

So he encouraged all of his men, including the 200 who were the most devastated and weary. But that's not all:

1Sa 30:26 Now when David came to Ziklag, he sent some of the spoil to the elders of Judah, to his friends, saying, "Here is a present for you from the spoil of the enemies of the Lord"— 27 to those who were in Bethel, those who were in Ramoth of the South, those who were in Jattir, 28 those who were in Aroer, those who were in Siphmoth, those who were in Eshtemoa, 29 those who were in Rachal, those who were in the cities of the Jerahmeelites, those who were in the cities of the Kenites, 30 those who were in Hormah, those who were in Chorashan, those who were in Athach, 31 those who were in Hebron, and to all the places where David himself and his men were accustomed to rove.

God had given him a great victory, and He wasn't about to hoard the blessings. He used it to encourage others. And the result, of course, is that respect and love for him increased from one end of the nation to the other. All of Israel recognized that a great leader had arisen among men.

His great secret? He learned to encourage himself in the Lord. In a couple of weeks, we're going to have a man here to preach for us whom I hold in great respect and admiration. He was the president of Columbia Bible College when I was a student there, Dr. Robertson McQuilkin. In his priceless little book, [A Promise Kept \(borrow this online copy\)](#), Dr. McQuilkin tells of a time in 1992 when he was utterly and absolutely overwhelmed. His dear wife, Muriel, was suffering from advancing Alzheimer's. His oldest son had been killed in a tragic accident. His life's work had to be abandoned at its zenith as he had resigned his college presidency to care for his wife. He said, "The joy had drained away" and he felt his grip slipping into the abyss of doubt and darkness.

But he recognized what was happening to him, and, leaving his wife in the care of another loved one, he went to a mountain hideaway to be alone with God. And there, he strengthened himself in the Lord. He later wrote, "Though it was slow coming, I gradually was able to break free from preoccupation with my troubles and concentrate on Jesus. When that happened, I relearned what God had taught me more than once before: The heavy heart lifts on the wings of praise."

Do you know how to encourage yourself in the Lord. It's the most important technique I know for making it through life as a leader and as a VIP—a very influential person. For after all, if God is for us, who can be against us? We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Heaven and earth may pass away, but Jesus never fails.