

TIMES OF TRANSITION

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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1 Samuel 16:1–23
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We recently started a ten-month series on the life of one of the great figures in the Bible, King David—a series that will take us through most of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel. Last week, Paul Taylor led us through 1 Samuel 15, which records God’s rejection of Israel’s previous king, Saul—a king who had repeatedly disobeyed God and repeatedly responded to his disobedience with denial, blame, rationalization, and justification. This week, we’ll be looking at 1 Samuel 16, which records the time of transition between Saul and David, the ‘in between time’ separating one significant chapter in Israel’s history from another.

Hopefully, too, during this study this morning, we’ll also learn some valuable lessons that will help us during our own times of transition, during our own in between times. Often, these times are filled with excitement and anticipation, like when I graduated from high school and was looking forward to leaving home for college. I couldn’t wait to say good-bye to San Diego and say hello UC Santa Barbara, which I somehow envisioned as heaven on earth. Unfortunately, perhaps even more often, times of transition are filled with a sense of loss, sadness, and anxiety. Dreams have perhaps been shattered, hopes have been dashed, and the way forward looks painful and unclear. Relationships end, bosses hand out pink slips, houses burn down, and we find ourselves at a difficult crossroads—crossroads without any obvious road signs to guide us.

For example, I remember when my wife and I, along with our three young children, first moved to Palo Alto at the end of 1986. We’d come to Palo Alto in order to do church planting with Calvary Chapel, and we’d arrived with a great sense of excitement and anticipation, looking forward to what God was going to do. And yet, only a year and a half later, the entire dream fell apart. The fledgling church came to an end in what I’ve come to call “The Great Battle of the Bylaws”—a battle where I learned that some Christian sheep are carnivorous! At that point, we were out of money, disillusioned, and had no clear options for what to do next.

No doubt some of you have gone through—or are perhaps currently going through—a similar painful time of transition. One chapter of life ends and the next chapter is uncertain. If you’ve gone through, or are going through, such a time, I hope the teaching this morning will be helpful. And if you haven’t, well... take note, because the chances are almost certain that you will!

Last week Paul talked about God’s rejection of Saul as Israel’s king. He talked about a painful end to one chapter in Israel’s history. Saul had started with great promise and ended in disgrace. The glorious dream had been shattered and, as we resume the story, we find a sense of loss and grieving, at least for the prophet Samuel, who had anointed Saul as king. The question is, how will a transition take place? How will God move the nation forward into the next chapter? Furthermore, what can we learn that will help us as move forward during our own transitional times?

Since our time together this morning is relatively brief, I’d like to focus on four main points.

Point #1: Letting go of the past. The first point is found in verse 1. Namely, times of transition can only take place if we let go of the past—if we stop allowing the past to control us, preventing us from taking steps forward.

1 Samuel 16:1:

“The Lord said to Samuel, ‘How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.’”

There’s a time to mourn and there’s a time to learn from the past. As Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Perhaps some of you are going through your own time of grieving or reflection this morning. If so, may the Lord comfort and encourage you. However, for a variety of reasons, many people often get stuck in the past, stuck in the

ruins of some heartbreak, disappointment, or trauma. Put somewhat differently, there are people who spend their entire lives looking in their rear-view mirrors, allowing the past to exert an unhealthy control over them, keeping them from focusing on the road ahead. At a certain point, if we're ever going to transition into the next chapter of life, God is going to tell us, like he tells Samuel, "It's time to let go of the past. It's time to stop grieving and mourning. It's time to move forward." This is same idea conveyed by the apostle Paul in Philippians when he says, "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14).

Similarly, this idea is found in the famous Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr, a prayer that is often recited at recovery meetings. The opening lines are a heartfelt request:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the different.

At a certain point, we need to ask God to help us to accept the things we cannot change. We need to ask God to help us to accept 'It is what it is,' as people nowadays sometimes say. Until such acceptance occurs—until we stop mourning over the shattered dreams—we will never have any serenity, never have any peace. Furthermore, we will never be able to move forward, never be able to transition into the next chapter of life that God wants to anoint and bless.

In addition, at least in Samuel's case, God includes a mild but firm rebuke. Samuel had mourned longer than he should have. He was no longer on the same page with God. In effect, God says, "I'm ready to move forward and you need to stop lagging behind!" At times, God uses that same loving but firm tone with us as well, urging us to get up and get moving.

In my own case, after The Great Battle of the Bylaws, my wife and I probably spent two years in mourning here at PBC, where we'd arrived as essentially wounded spiritual refugees. We spent two years sitting in the back of the church, grieving over the shattered dream. And yet, thankfully, God slowly helped us to heal and begin moving forward again. He got us back up and rolling, even though it was a process that took a number of years and sometimes required some loving but firm divine prodding.

Point #2: Overcoming Fears about the Future. The second point about times of transition is found in verses 2-3. Not only do we need to let go of the past, we also need to overcome fears about the future.

1 Samuel 16:2-3:

"And Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' ³ And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you.'"

In these verses, we see that Samuel was afraid. He was afraid that if he took his anointing horn filled with oil, Saul would see him, realize that he was on his way to anoint a new king, and kill him. If Samuel did what God told him to do, he imagined bad things were going to happen. Sometimes we do this ourselves. We catastrophize. We imagine the worst case scenario and then convince ourselves that the worst case scenario is in fact going to happen. These kinds of fears, sometimes founded and sometimes unfounded, can obviously prevent us from moving forward. They stand like giants blocking the road ahead of us and keeping us from transitioning into the next chapter of life.

Again, in my own case, when I was asked to join the staff here at PBC, it was particularly challenging for my wife, Brigitte. Eighteen years had passed since we'd arrived at PBC, during which time I'd gone back to school, gotten a teaching credential, become a 6th grade teacher, acquired tenure, climbed the pay scale, and was sailing smoothly along. When I told my wife that I thought God was calling me to leave my secure government job and become a pastor working with addicts and alcoholics, well... let's just say she was less than enthusiastic. To put it bluntly, she was afraid—afraid that her husband was once again doing something completely insane that would result in disaster—a fear that many would agree was not entirely without basis!

On top of that, Brigitte had fears about being a pastor's wife. What exactly would that mean? Would a pastor's wife, for example, be required to bring jello to church potlucks? The idea didn't exactly strike terror into her, but she definitely found it unappealing. Thankfully, of course, God has a way of working all of us through our fears, whether they're fears of being killed or fears of endless jello-molds. He has a way of defeating the intimidating giants that often stand before us.

In Samuel's case, the way God dealt with his fear—his fear of being killed—has sparked considerable debate. God instructed Samuel to tell Saul that the trip to Bethlehem was for the purpose of conducting a sacrifice. In one sense this was true, but it clearly wasn't the whole truth. Indeed, it perhaps wasn't even the central truth—and this is what has sparked the debate. To some, God appears to be encouraging Samuel to be deceptive, or at least misleading. In turn, the question arises: is it wrong for God to reveal some things and conceal others? Is it wrong for God to disclose part of the truth but not the whole truth?

Uncomfortable as this may make us, the reality is, God reserves the right to tell each of us what he thinks we need to know when he thinks we need to know it. This, as I say, may make us uncomfortable. And yet, what we sometimes fail to realize is that our lack of comfort may be connected to our doubts about the goodness of God—to our own doubts about God's good, loving, and perfect plan for us. If we genuinely believed that God's intentions towards us were good, then we would thank him for the truth he reveals and thank him for the truth he does not. Indeed, I suspect God's mercy is frequently what keeps him from disclosing the whole truth to us all at once. He gives us as much of the truth as we can handle, and he protects us from the truth we would find overwhelming.

Perhaps, in the current passage, God is not only protecting Samuel, he is also protecting Saul. Perhaps God knew that Saul couldn't handle the entire truth about Samuel's trip to Bethlehem—or at least couldn't handle the entire truth without resorting to murder. And so, God mercifully protected Saul from being overwhelmed by a truth that might have caused him to become a murderer.

Whatever the case, the interesting theological lesson appears to be this: from God's perspective, not everybody needs to know everything—or at least they don't need to know everything right away. Yes, God will one day bring everything to light, but in the meantime the revelation of truth appears to be like the proverbial image of peeling an onion. It's a process—a process that occurs over a period of time.

Point #3: Being Open to Unlikely Possibilities. The third point about times of transition is found in verses 4-13. When we go through times of transition, we not only need to let go of the past and overcome our fears about the future, we also need to be open to unlikely possibilities. We need to be open to the possibility that God wants us to do something outside the box, that he

wants us to head down an unlikely the road, a road that might at first seem strange or even ridiculous.

1 Samuel 16: 4-13:

Samuel did what the Lord commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, "Do you come peaceably?"⁵ And he said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice." And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before him."⁷ But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one."¹⁰ And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen these."¹¹ Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here."¹² And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the Lord said, "Arise, anoint him, for this is he."¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.

God is the master of the unlikely and the unexpected—of choosing people and possibilities that don't seem obvious. As it says in 1 Corinthians, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." (1 Corinthians 1:27). Perhaps all of Jesse's older sons looked kingly. Perhaps they looked like the world's stereotype of a king, just as Saul had (1 Samuel 9:2). By contrast, many commentators believe David was only around fifteen at the time—the age of a high school freshman or sophomore. Which is to say, for God to choose a shepherd boy like David as Israel's next king would be like God choosing a high school sophomore

from a ranch in Idaho to become the next president of the United States! To most this would seem absurd—although, depending on your political preference, I suppose some would find it a welcome change!

The point is, just as Samuel needed to be open to unlikely possibilities, we need to be as well. If we only have tunnel vision—if we're only open to hearing from God if he's willing to co-sign on our agenda—then we may miss his plan for our lives altogether. If we only make decisions based on outward appearances, rather than allowing God to show us the heart of the matter, then the outcome will ultimately not be what we had hoped.

The key sentence in these verses is of course the sentence “For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16: 7b). Ultimately, as we discover in Acts 13:22, David was “a man after God’s own heart”. David had a heart that was pleasing to God, a heart in which God delighted. And exactly what kind of heart was that? What kind of heart did David have? Clearly, it wasn't a heart that was free from sin, as we'll increasingly learn as the story unfolds. Saul and David both sinned. And yet, as we'll also learn, the two men responded to sin very differently.

To unpack this idea a bit more, David, unlike Saul, did not respond to sin with denial, blame, rationalization, and justification. Instead, he responded with genuine brokenness and repentance. As David himself writes in Psalm 51—the psalm written after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba—“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17). In response to his sin, David had a broken and contrite heart. That's the kind of heart God did not despise. That's the kind a heart that pleased God. Furthermore, it's the kind of heart God wanted for the next king of Israel, even though it existed at the time within a fifteen year old shepherd boy.

In terms of personal application for us, we need to be open to unlikely possibilities, open to the possibility of God calling us down an unlikely or unexpected fork in the road. And yet, the question is, how will we recognize the unlikely fork in the road when it's before us? And, even more importantly, how will we know that the unlikely fork is in fact the right fork?

The answer of course involves seeing life through God's eyes rather than our own. Man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart. As a result, we need to be continually asking God to give us his eyes. We need to be continually asking God to give us eyes that

see into the heart of the matter. Ultimately, this involves faith, which has been described as spiritual eyesight. Our physical eyesight shows us outward appearances, but the eyes of faith show us the heart. The eyes of faith show us life as God sees it—life as it really is.

Point #4: Trusting God to Make Things Happen. We need to let go of the past, we need to overcome our fears about the future, and we need to be open to unlikely possibilities. Those are the first three points this morning. Now, fourth and finally, during times of transition, we also need to trust God to make things happen. We need to trust God to orchestrate events, rather than attempting to make things happen in our own strength and ability.

1 Samuel 16:14-23:

Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him. ¹⁵ And Saul's servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you.” ¹⁶ Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” ¹⁷ So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” ¹⁸ One of the young men answered, “Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him.” ¹⁹ Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with the sheep.” ²⁰ And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. ²¹ And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. ²² And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” ²³ And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.

Before we talk about the ‘harmful’ (literally ‘evil’) spirit that God sent to Saul, let's first look at the idea of God making things happen. Specifically, after David was anointed as king, it was God who created the circumstances whereby David could leave the sheepfold and enter the halls of power. It was God who initiated events by opening a door that David could never have

opened for himself. God not only chooses unlikely people, he also chooses unlikely methods. David had no military experience, no political savvy, and no economic expertise. He was, at least by worldly standards, unqualified to enter the king's presence. And yet, God made a way where there seemed to be no way—a way that involved the use of David's Spirit-filled music.

Again, in terms of application to our own lives, yes, we need to see life through God's eyes; however, we also need to rely on God's power. We need to trust God's mighty hand to open the right doors at the right time. Indeed, sometimes our greatest failures during times of transition occur when we've understood God's calling for our lives—when we've understood the unlikely fork in the road that he wants us to go down—but then we take matters into our own hands and start racing down the road ahead of him. This, I believe, is what happened with our failed church-plant in Palo Alto. I knew that God had called me to be a pastor, but I rushed ahead of him—about 18 years ahead of him—trying to make something happen on my own.

Now, as for the harmful or evil spirit that God sent to Saul to torment him, the question inevitably arises, how can a good God send an evil spirit? How can a good God be the apparent author of evil? Moreover, why would a good God send Saul an evil spirit and then work through David's music to remove it? And beyond that, why was the evil spirit only removed temporarily and not permanently?

The short answer, I believe, is described by the apostle Paul.

Romans 1:28-31

“And since they [those who had turned their backs on God] did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

When people don't see fit to acknowledge God, God gives them over to a debased or disapproved mind. When people don't want God, he withdraws his Spirit

from them, leaving them in effect with a mind, a spirit, characterized by everything he is not. Put somewhat differently, if people don't want God, God grants their request. He honors their free will. He departs from them, and his absence is quickly filled with everything that is unlike him—with everything that is described in Romans 1, with everything that no doubt tormented Saul.

The question remains, why did God send David to Saul? Why did God reach through David's music to remove Saul's evil spirit? Moreover, why was the removal only temporary and not permanent? Again, the short answer, I believe, is that God still loved Saul. Indeed, God may well have been lovingly reaching out to Saul through David's music, attempting to woo Saul back to himself. God was reminding Saul of the Spirit he had one known, encouraging Saul to finally repent and turn to him.

Sadly, it appears that Saul remained unrepentant and unchanged, which is why the removal of the evil spirit was only temporary. Saul was like Esau, who, as the author of Hebrews tells us, “When he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” (Hebrews 12:17). Saul and Esau wanted to be blessed, but they were rejected because they couldn't find it within themselves to repent, even though they shed many tears. Some people, as Charles Stanley observed, want you to feel sorry for them, but they don't want to change. Saul and Esau were apparently those kinds of people. Had they genuinely repented, they would genuinely have changed, and had they genuinely changed, their relief from the evil spirit that tormented them would have been permanent, not temporary.

I realize this has been somewhat of a whirlwind attempt to go through 1 Samuel 16 this morning. Trying to go through an entire chapter in 35 minutes is at best daunting. However, I pray that something this morning has been helpful to you, especially to those of you who may be going through a painful time of transition. May God help all of us during those times. May he help us to know when to let go of the past. May he help us to overcome our fears about the future. May he help us to be open to unlikely possibilities. And may he help us to trust in him to accomplish whatever needs to be accomplished.