

1 Samuel 10:19b-27

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Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

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THE DANGER OF SUCCESS

Well Begun Is Only Half Done

Dear Friends in Christ,

He was a farmer, a tall strapping young man, doing a very farmer-like thing. His father had lost some donkeys, so this son got sent out on the thankless job of finding donkeys. He poked around the backroads and hills for days, but he couldn't find the animals. The story goes on for a whole page in the Bible. It gives the donkey recovery itinerary – places you have never heard of like Shaalim, Shalisha, Zuph. And if you are just reading the Bible for the first time, you wonder what the point is. Well, finally, the young man gets to a small town and in desperation asks a stranger, “Do you know where I can find the prophet Samuel?” The stranger says, “I am Samuel, your donkeys are found, and I have a message for you from God.” The next morning, the sun still low in the sky and the air cool, the prophet Samuel escorted the farmer down the road a piece and told him to kneel down, and there he anointed Saul, the farmer’s son looking for donkeys, he anointed him the first king of all Israelites.

A few days later Samuel called all Israel together to make it public, and that is our reading, our sermon text, which I now read to you:

1 Samuel 10:19 “[Samuel said,] ‘You have said, ‘No, set a king over us.’ So now present yourselves before the LORD by your tribes and clans.”

20 When Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, the tribe of Benjamin was chosen. 21 Then he brought forward the tribe of Benjamin, clan by clan, and Matri’s clan was chosen. Finally Saul son of Kish was chosen. But when they looked for him, he was not to be found. 22 So they inquired further of the LORD, “Has the man come here yet?”

And the LORD said, “Yes, he has hidden himself among the baggage.”

23 They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others. 24 Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.”

Then the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

25 Samuel explained to the people the regulations of the kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD. Then Samuel dismissed the people, each to his own home.

26 Saul also went to his home in Gibeath, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched. 27 But some troublemakers said, “How can this fellow save us?” They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent.

I. A Successful Beginning

A. Saul’s Realistic Humility

Now I know there are questions. Like, if Saul knew he would be king, why was he hiding in the baggage? I don’t really know how *they* did it, but if it was anything like the big overnight meetings we had in Zambia with hundreds of people, they didn’t have hotel rooms or even tents. We slept under the stars. We brought our luggage, and there would be a fenced in baggage area, fence made of freshly cut saplings and sheaves of newly cut 6 foot tall grass. The leaders would select a few trusted individuals who would

guard the baggage area. Well, Saul must have walked into something like that when they started the king selection process.

Why Saul was hiding when he knew he would be the next king? Some people might find fault in him. After all, we want a leader who is not afraid to lead. But I think most sensible people in Saul's position would have hidden. Just imagine being Saul:

- Saul was a village farmer, asked to be king of the nation. Would you feel qualified?
- At just this time Israel was hard-pressed by enemies on the west and east. The week before Saul was out chasing donkeys. Would you feel you have the knowledge to lead your nation's military forces to victory?
- It seems he was a content young man of 25-30 years of age. There is quite a bit of politics in king selection. Would you want to give up farming life for that brood of vipers?

Kingship, you see, fell into Saul's lap. He didn't campaign for it. And so this humble young man trembles when the reins of power are put in his hands.

B. Saul's Restraint

Another good sign of Saul's character is the last verse: "**Some troublemakers said, 'How can this fellow save us?' They despised [Saul] and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent"** (27). If someone achieves a great honor, envious people will be gunning for him. By not bringing a gift to the king, the naysayers were just short of outright rebellion—just like their words, "How can this fellow save us?" "**But Saul kept silent.**"

Did he keep silent because he was weak? I believe it a sign of his strength. The Bible records that just a week or two later, when Saul led Israel on a successful military expedition, "*The people then said, 'Who was it that asked, "Shall Saul reign over us?" Bring these men to us and we will put them to death.' But Saul said, 'No one shall be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel'*" (11:12-13). Israel's new king is a man with restraint, not drunk on power. He did not seek to establish his throne by destroying his enemies.

C. The Coronation Sealed By God

Finally, one more thing gave great hope on this day. "**Samuel explained to the people the regulations of the kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD.**" This special day was crowned with God's Word. All our great moments of life should be – birth, baptism, confirmation, graduation, marriage. The day of the king's coronation was made complete with God's word. Samuel the prophet reminded the people and the king of what a godly ruler should be. They probably read from Deuteronomy chapter 17, the king chapter in the Law of Moses.

Israel could rejoice in this day. They had a king. An impressive looking yet humble king. This king knew how to exercise restraint. His coronation was based on God's choice and dedicated to observing God's rules.

And that is how God turned around Saul's life. One day a farmer most concerned with finding lost donkeys, the next a king shepherding a nation. ——Oh, that the story had ended there.

II. Success Turned to Ruin

In our series, "Turning Things Around," we have seen God's undeserved love lavished upon people.

- In the first of the series, the Apostle Paul was turned around from absolute unbelief, even animosity, to believe in Jesus as his Savior.
- In the second, Ruth was herself an embodiment of God's grace. Her mother-in-law Naomi had experienced the worst of life, losing her husband and children while a refugee. But Ruth was God's answer to Naomi, turning her life from despair to hope.

- Last week we considered how Christians can and do fall into sin. God's Word taught us that God uses godly sorrow to turn us around, so that we are forgiven and restored.
- In this final sermon of the series one more word must be said: We need to look to God not just in times of great need, but even when we feel no need, even when we succeed.

Do you know what a tragedy is? A tragedy is when someone with great potential, ends badly. Over the past year or so, that is what made the story of a young local woman killed in a car crash, so gripping. She was a young woman who had so much of life before her. Suddenly it was over.

The Bible has its tragedies. The great tragedy of the Old Testament is Saul. He started so good, but... It was the voices that did it. No, Saul wasn't insane. It was real voices. He couldn't tune them out. In fact, if you go through the list of Israel's kings, you won't find one who stood up to the voices. David didn't; Solomon didn't; Asa, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah didn't. The best of Israel's kings, every single one of them, heard the voices and gave in. What did the voices sound like?

The voices are voices that successful people hear. It is the promise of more success. Here is what the voices sounded like in Saul's life:

Shortly after becoming king, Israel engaged in a battle with the Philistines. The prophet Samuel said to Saul, "Wait for me to show up on the battlefield. I will offer the sacrifice to God, then you can go to battle." It wasn't Samuel's voice but his soldiers' voices that confused Saul. Samuel was late getting to the battlefield. Soldiers were getting worried; some deserted. Enemy forces were massing. Saul, the commander in chief, ordered. "Bring me the sacrifices." That wasn't like Earl or Brien assisting with communion. In the Old Testament God said that if you weren't a priest, you were not to make sacrifices – or you were to die. But Saul made the sacrifices. Just then, the bloody knife still in Saul's hand, Samuel showed up and confronted Saul. Saul just made lame excuses. (1 Samuel 13).

A little later Saul heard the voices again. A young man named David (yes, the one who would be king), David killed Goliath. Coming back to the ticker-tape parade, King Saul and the soldier David were welcomed by the ladies of the land dancing and singing – rejoicing that their men had safely returned from war. The beautiful flowers of the land danced and sang, "*Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands*" Saul got so angry! He thought, "*They have credited David with tens of thousands, but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?*" (1 Samuel 18). He couldn't take those voices. He needed people's approval, all of it. Success can do that to you.

It happens in different ways. For a king, you have to have the greatest honor; a preacher wants compliments; a salesman wants sales; a worker wants a raise and promotion. The voice of success requires more, or it isn't success. I got a car, but I need the house. I got a house, but I need the boat. I got the boat, but my kids need an inheritance.

The idea of "success" is not limited to wealth and power. Success can affect housewives too. Achieve the perfect family measured by the health and happiness of the family, and the number of activities. It affects retirees who feel a need to keep up a certain quality of life. Younger people need to feel approval over choices in clothing, music, and everything else or life isn't worth living.

Having or achieving these things are not wrong as long as God isn't squeezed out. But the voices of success care nothing for God. Those voices demand everything from us, and convince us that all that we need to succeed is within us. God becomes an outsider, an obstacle, and his kingdom is neglected.

That is what makes the 24th chapter of 1 Samuel one of the saddest in the Bible. Years down the line, King Saul was trying to kill off his once favorite soldier, David—you know, the one that had "*killed his tens of thousands.*" Saul had become obsessed. One day Saul nearly had David in his clutches. Saul went into a cave. (They didn't have gas stations with bathrooms in those days.) It was the very cave where David was hiding. Now, some would say that David had good reason to kill Saul in self-defense. Instead, David cut a corner off of Saul's robe and then let Saul go on his way. When Saul was a distance off, David

bowed down toward his king and called out, “Saul, I could have killed you, but I didn’t.” Saul looked down at his robe and knew the truth. Saul knew there was something broken inside himself. He, the king, began sobbing! David’s kindness won over the very man who was trying to kill him. In David, God turned Saul from his ways. But this is what makes that story so tragic: Saul repented of his poisoned success only for the moment, it did not last long.

Years after his blessed coronation, this is Scriptures’ final judgment, “[*Saul*] did not keep the word of the *LORD*... So the *LORD* put him to death” (1 Chronicles 10:13-14).

The danger of success is great. It is huge. And you don’t have to be a king to be tempted by it.

And here I have got to the end of my sermon time and I wish I could keep going. But perhaps the best antidote is not a laundry list of spiritual to-do items. It just might be the straight undiluted word of God. And to that, I have two, both answers to the idolatrous calls of success:

- From Philippians 3:8, “*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus... not having a righteousness of my own... but that which is through faith in Christ Jesus.*”
- From the Seventy-Third Psalm, “*You, O Lord, will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever*” (25-26).

May God keep you content with the success he gives. Amen.